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**Dancing in the Dark: described dances and unseen choreographies**

**Sue Smith**

Submitted to Falmouth University/University of the Arts London in partial fulfilment of  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2015

## Acknowledgements

This research has been undertaken to clarify and deepen my choreographic practice in terms of my relationship to my work and the work's relationship to wider practice and discursive contexts, particularly those associated with the emergent field of described and unseen dance performance. A key objective of this doctoral project is to make a useful contribution to the developing field of dance performance work that will clarify and expand the ways that performers, witnesses/audiences, and reflective commentators may engage with such work through a wider range of senses and sensibilities.

I wish to acknowledge my supervisors; Professor Emilyn Claid, Dr David Prior, and Dr Claire Macdonald who have offered thoughtful and generous support and my studio collaborators in particular; Roseanna Anderson, Josh Ben-Tovim, Lex Hibbert, Jane Mason, Juliet Robson and Kuldip Singh-Barmi. Thanks to my family for their patience and especially to my dad, Dennis Smith, for his guidance and determined belief in me.

I confirm this thesis has not been submitted for a comparable academic award.

## Abstract

This thesis enquires how a rethinking of sight as the primary sense for experiencing dance performance can instigate new choreographies that embody the interplay between seen and unseen, described and not described, inside and outside, subject and object. By 'unseen' I mean invisible to the eye but potentially available to other senses or imaginative capacities. Choreography is a methodological and critical lens through which to explore relationships between description, translation and sensory perception in a range of performance engagements that invite multi-sensory attention.

The research is launched with implications arising from a consideration of audio-description: the supposed neutrality of the speaker, the potential for cultural mismatches or power tensions in translation and the challenge of making spoken language more fully represent the body in performance. The thesis argues that rethinking ideas of description, from the beginning of a devising process, can lead to the production of choreographic work that does not privilege vision.

The research for this thesis has involved choreographic practice combined with writing. In this writing, the on-going narrative of my choreographic studio work has been deliberately interwoven with analysis and contextualisation of this practice. The different elements enacted in the studio and at the writing desk have continually interacted, back and forth, identifying in the process, appropriate objectives for successive phases. For example, the reflections stimulated at each phase of concurrent theoretical research and studio work have deepened my choreographic enquiries, while also identifying other points requiring further exploration. This exploration has been carried out during further practical choreographic experiments in the studio, triggering still further theoretical analysis, and so on. In this way, the dancer writing becomes, and interacts with, the writer dancing.

Sensory and kinaesthetic knowledge can build a more integrated and immersive sensual experience of dance as something to be not just observed but also engaged in. The intention is that insights from the research will inform strategies for original choreography expressed in performance.



## Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	
i images	6
ii catalogue of choreographic works	6
iii digital data storage and filmed works	7
1.1 Dancing in the Dark – captured moments of performance June 2015	8
1.2 Thesis overview	10
1.3 Methodology	16
1.4 Chapter outline	22
<b>2. Context review</b>	25
2.1 Audio description guidelines and translation	25
2.2 Models of disability in audio description	27
2.3 Speaking of performance	33
2.4 Approaching perception	37
<b>3. Described Dances - Outside In</b>	44
3.1 A Woman Walks	44
3.2 Into Overdrive – towards a dynamic equivalence	49
3.3 Missing	54
3.4 Thicker Description	56
3.5 Translating back to the body	58
3.6 One Man Band	60
<b>4. Described Dances - Inside Out</b>	65
4.1 Into Knots	65
4.2 Dances that Describe Themselves	72
<b>5. Unseen Choreographies</b>	82
5.1 The Wrong Description	83
5.2 The Seen Unseen	85
5.3 1 O’Clock	88
5.4 Invisible Dances	91

<b>6. Dancing in the Dark</b>	96
6.1 Or maybe just standing - performance reflections	96
6.2 Conclusions	105
<b>7. References</b>	108

## 1 Introduction

### i Images

1 Dancing in the Dark performance 2015	8
2 Dancing in the Dark performance 2015	8
3 Dancing in the Dark performance 2015	9
4 One Man Band	63
5 Into Knots	68
6 Into Knots	70
7 Dances That Describe Themselves	75
8 The Wrong Description	85
9 1 O'clock	91

### Credits

Dancers: Roseanna Anderson, Josh Ben-Tovim, Jane Mason, Juliet Robson, Kuldip Singh-Barmi

Photography: Kate Mount and Sue Smith

### ii My choreographic works referred to in this document;

A Woman Walks	2009 & 2012
1 O'clock	2010
The Wrong Description	2011
Into Knots	2011-14
...and I was like wow	2012
One Man Band	2012
Dancing in the Dark	2015

### iii Digital Data Storage

- Film 1      Outside In - A Woman Walks, One Man Band,
- Film 2      Inside Out - Into Knots
- Film 3      Unseen Choreographies - The Wrong Description, 1 O'clock
- Film 4      Dancing in the Dark performance

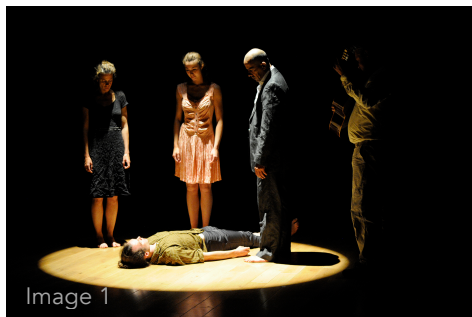
The films include examples of studio research that is referred to in the text.

Digital data storage: USB stick compatible with USB port.

## 1.1 Dancing in the Dark – captured moments

*He folds the paper and slides it back into his pocket.*

*Standing together in the half-light. The movement of her dress in the humming breeze softens the edges of her silhouette: the cool breath of the fan marking the direction of our attention. The light fades but the breeze continues a while. She is still here.*



*Standing close I feel the heat of bodies in the dark. I feel small. As he starts to crumple, melt, slowly letting go, he keeps his chin up: as if holding on with his eyes. With the very slight friction of fabric against me, he falls softly into the floor. We stand back to make way. Looking down I feel the distance between us. Goodbye. He seems to keep moving further away. I am lost. Hollow. We are still but the gap between us grows. I imagine the damp cold quiet of a cave: the way you can sense a vast expanse even in the dark.*

*“A man is lying on the ground.”*

*She reaches down to his hand and the moment is broken. Lights come up and the room opens as she leads him away. She directs him, “you put your hand here on my shoulder, like that”.*

*Two other performers watch with us. She talks him through the dance she is creating. He follows her, “and you hold me as I fall back and you rock me”. She describes the intricate choreography, emerging as remembered or imagined. A short dance develops and repeats, each time more layered with detail and fluidity. The other couple stands and watches: shifts position, stands and listens. As they perform the words they hear, a second dance is constructed. Their actions intersect, express some shared moments of shape or quality. They listen, concentrate, and then recreate: the process of making, interpreting, translating. A transposition from one couple to another. Decisions are exposed in the delicacy of the relationships: the tentative glance, the trembling hand, the pauses. And so a second duet and a quartet emerges.*



*“I come in just here and it’s all about me. I run in and through this corridor, yes stand there like that....and then I, I, well I die and its very sad. I fall like this and you catch me and lift me high up and we all go over here.”*

*"Now we are horses...."*

*Three performers gallop and leap in great circles around the outside perimeter of the room. The charge sweeps up, corrals us and I want to join in. The sound of feet, the irregular rhythms, the speed, three horses running at top speed together. I am swept along and I notice I am turning on the spot to follow the action. It's the sound of hooves on peat.*

*Each performer offers a piece of string to a witness then slowly starts to unravel it moving backwards. Their eyes shift between face, string and hands. As they step backwards into the room, a web of taught strings is created and the soft voices of the performers begin to be heard describing the lengthening then gathering in of the string. They speak directly to the person on the other end of their string. They pass others and their voices begin to layer. Snippets of commentary can be heard from all directions.*



*"I can feel the tension in the string as I start to gently pull. I can see your weight shift slightly into your heels as you resist a little. I'm watching my hands and the creases in my fingers and noticing that I'm almost holding my breath, I see a tightrope between us."*

The above images and text serve as a doorway into the thesis, being captured moments from the live performance research of *Dancing in the Dark* (June 2015), discussed in Chapter 6. They are a reminder that the thesis is a document led by and reflecting on choreographic research practice.

## 1.2 Thesis Overview

How can a radical rethinking of sight as the primary sense for experiencing dance performance instigate new choreographies that embody the interplay between seen and unseen, described and not described, inside and outside, subject and object?

My aim is to explore and assess how more immersive sensory experiences of dance, as a phenomenon to be engaged in rather than observed, can be achieved by integrating sensory and kinaesthetic forms of knowledge in choreography. In other words, by reflecting on and drawing upon these forms of knowledge in an explicit and systematic manner, my choreography can invite engagements that more holistically address the witness experience.

My choreography, for the purposes of this research, is devised with other performers and is closely involved with questions of verbal description, sensory perception, and inter-subjectivities in dance performance. The research focuses upon developing new choreographies whose core creative components do not privilege sight. It explores three interrelated matters:

1. Current practice in audio-description (AD) with a view to re-orienting this tool so that it becomes a productive catalyst for spoken and recorded poetic texts that reveal or provoke unseen presences and offer more integrated communicative modes in performance.
2. The experience of dance performance, which may be reconsidered in respect of proximal, kinaesthetic and sonic presences which has the potential to reorient artistic production itself as the site of rethinking the primacy of vision.
3. The web of intersubjectivities in performer and witness engagement, which can evoke new choreographic textures that invite multi-sensory attention.

Instigating my enquiry into described dances was my experience of audio describing a piece of my choreography for visually impaired people attending a performance in Belfast<sup>1</sup>. After my initial enthusiasm, I ground to a halt. I did not have a language or a method to use. I struggled to find the right words to capture a choreography that was deliberately ambiguous. I was aware that a commentary developed for this select audience would offer insights to my choreography that would remain unavailable to the majority of the audience. This created a tension between my desire to improve access to the work for the non-sighted group and the narrative ambiguity of the choreography.

This experience prompted research into audio description (AD) guidelines. These are produced by many organisations and are used as a source text for my describing experiments in the studio.<sup>2</sup> Companies such as StopGAP, Graeae Theatre Company and Salamanda Tandem offer imaginative approaches to AD and these examples provide useful orientation for how AD might be reconfigured in my own choreography within a more creative frame. They also support enquiry into how ambiguity and uncertainty can be accounted for in a work and how this can affect its identities and meanings.

AD is often referred to in guidance as a narrative 'translation'. An examination of the application and potential of AD through the prism of 'translation' offers perspectives for analysing the relationship between describer, listener and the artwork. Translation studies and the inter-relations with cultural studies can position AD in dance as a type of cultural translation from visual image to speech. In particular, theoretical oppositions between formal and dynamic equivalence are used as a frame for considering the tensions between an autonomy in the AD as a poetic rendering of the artwork and its instrumental function as an expression of its meaning.<sup>3</sup> Outside a dance context, AD research at the University of Surrey (2007) and in the broadcast media (Independent Theatre Council 2000), alongside museum

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<sup>1</sup> Tonic, CandoCo Dance Company (1999) Queens Theatre, Belfast

<sup>2</sup> American Council of the Blind 2009; ITC 2000; OFCOM 2010; RNIB 2010

<sup>3</sup> Formal and dynamic equivalence as identified by Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber (1964 and 1969)



and gallery research by Vocaleyes (2009), a UK audio description charity, provide orientation for 'translating' art.

My process of exploring AD is also informed by considering the unseen presences of the body in performance: audible, kinaesthetic or 'felt' in some other way. In the context of my own choreography, the forming, manipulation or provocation of sensory attention from an audience is grounded in an awareness of the cultural conventions of contemporary mainstream theatre and the development in dance studies of ideas of 'kinaesthetic empathy'.<sup>4</sup> Dance performance is considered in this research, as a multi-sensory experience which Ann Cooper Albright in, *Choreographing Difference – The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997:xix) describes as, 'more than the flat, visual gaze...kinaesthetic, aural, spatial and somatic sensations'. The performer as a sonic and kinaesthetically charged presence is explored and new sense connections are identified. The manipulation of sensory modes is explored to unsettle and direct attention and to investigate the potential for layered interpretations of the performance.

This work prompts explorations of the role the non-visual senses may play in understanding how a body is moving. Choreography as a non-visual phenomenon is explored and new possibilities for interpretations, which resonate with phenomenological readings of dance spectatorship as an embodied sensory experience emerge, that bring the perceptive experience into the foreground.

I examine approaches to choreography, which consider these engagements, outlined above, as a core element of the creation process. The exchanges are considered as inter-subjectivities between performers and audience. The active attention to the experiential nature of dance performance marks a search for what is essential in an individual's engagement with the dance and on the reciprocity between witness and performer. I frame this research within the context of this active perceptive process and I address phenomenology as a way of expressing my methodological approach (detailed further in 1.3). My describing practice in the studio invites attention to inter-

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<sup>4</sup> Foster (2008,2011), Reynolds and Reason (2010), Keen (2006)

subjectivity and the fluctuating absences and presences of phenomenological enquiry.

In *The Senses in Performance*, Banes and Lepecki (2007:1) introduce the senses as, 'historically bound cultural agents, constantly being activated and repressed, reinvented and reproduced, rehearsed and improvised'. This approach to understanding how we use and have used our senses in performance-making over time provides some historical context for AD in contemporary dance. The way we see is and always has been culturally directed. I ground my research into the wider sensorium in this context.

Hearing and listening, while in rapport, are not synonymous. Hearing is generally a passive activity, something that takes place without conscious effort: it takes place while watching a live dance performance. Listening requires deliberate effort and is achieved through a directed application of attention. In contrast to hearing, listening elicits memory, association and expectation as part of an active 'making sense', suggesting an incorporation of a range of strategies for interpreting the world depending on the conditions and intention. When the lights go down to blackout in theatre, we listen. In the absence of sight, our ears prick up. Attention can be directed and the active process experienced when 'listening' can be invited in other particular witness/performer engagements. Sondra Fraleigh (1987:7) writes that, 'consciousness is intentional: it depends on one's perceptual attention to phenomena. Phenomenology stresses that consciousness is an activity, not a passivity'

It is necessary to define how I am using terms with reference to dance performance. With its focus on one sensory mode, the term 'audience' meaning 'to hear' is specific to listening and 'spectator' relates directly to sight. The whole body experience of witnessing dance contradicts these terms and neither is able to capture or represent the complexities of experiencing dance performance. 'Witness' as Peggy Phelan introduced the term in *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (1993), is more relevant to how this research approaches the performance engagement. The expression, 'to bear witness' implies a more active engagement with an event and is less passive than audience or spectator. Phelan refers to the need for the witness to take part empathetically in the performance, to share in the unfolding of the event and to take

some responsibility for the experience. A witness chooses not to be passive and also has a role to play for the performer, being an active partner in the communicative exchange.

The relationships that emerge out of navigating some of the challenges of AD, multi-sensory perception and inter-subjectivities between performers, self and witnesses, inform and instigate my choreographic practice. The initial investigations into AD address how speech and sight operate together and raise questions of interpretation and the relationships between witnesses and performers.

As part of the investigation of the above relationships, the process of describing dances is also approached from the point of view of the performer. Attention to the complexities of occupying both object and subject roles in the process of describing is informed by Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1964) and Serres' (2008) approaches to perception. Examples of works that explore identity in the voice of the performer (Bull 1976, Jones 1979) are analysed with the intention of illuminating this challenge and activating new choreographic method. The voices of the performers themselves can highlight aspects of identity and reveal presences usually unavailable to witnesses. I refer to my work, *Into Knots* (2011-14) that encompasses experiments with descriptions that are evoked through voicing movements in the moment of doing.

I introduce the term 'unseen choreographies' to refer to choreographies that are hidden from view. It can mean dances that take place in the dark in a shared space, dances that are invisible and take place in a different space to the witnesses for example, Bock and Vincenzi's (2003) *Invisible Dances...from afar. A show that will never be shown*. Unseen choreographies can present multiple presences that are not immediately apparent to witnesses and reveal the voice from inside the choreographies that explores the complex relationship between movement performance and text. The sonic and kinaesthetic presences of performers can also be unseen.

Aspects of Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality and the reciprocal act of seeing, as an experience likened to that of touching, is considered in relation to the

performer/witness relationship. Merleau-Ponty (1968:131&133) explains that the act of looking strongly shapes what is being looked at. The research asks whether this also resonates in unseen connections.

This research begins with an appraisal of AD but it does not attempt to represent or analyse the experience of blind or visually impaired audiences, nor is its intention to create a performance for visually impaired audiences. I reject the idea of 'blind people' as a group and focus instead on the multiple subjectivities present in individual performer and witness experiences: seen and unseen. There is as much diversity as there is amongst the expectations and needs of seeing audiences. The Arts Council *Talking Images* (2003) research shows us that in measuring the helpfulness of different kinds of access support, for example large print, Braille and talking guides, there were approximately the same numbers finding modes 'unhelpful' as 'helpful'. The notion of visually impaired people as a group who share substantial aspects of life experience is unhelpful: an artificially created group whose experiences of the world, expectations and priorities are not linked by measurable consistencies.

In my research on visually impaired individuals' responses to AD, I have been struck (and confused) by the diversity of feelings regarding audio-description: 'I want to know everything you can see' (*Talking Dances*, 2007) and, 'I don't want to be distracted by the things that aren't important, just tell me what I need to know.' (Hibbert 2009).<sup>5</sup> The idea that there is a consensus in the needs of blind people as a group regarding AD is unfounded.

Researching AD and subsequently addressing only the non-visual aspects of dance reinforces the impossibility and inappropriateness of imagining what it might be like to be blind – this is neither possible nor helpful. The experience of a loss of vision is complex and individual and my experiments with AD and with the senses in no way allude to either understanding blindness or exploring blindness as a condition or part of life. I focus instead on AD as a tool that could be employed to explore dance performance from a less vision-centric position for all audiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous comment from *Talking Dances* (2007)

The experience in Belfast challenged me to question the differences between what and how I was seeing as a choreographer and how I might use spoken texts to reveal aspects of performance that were hidden or to suggest new engagements to some or all of the witnesses. This research was set in motion by this event (though it took some years for me to formulate it in these terms), stimulated by my determination to explore, unravel and challenge the questions and practices that were implied in audio-description. Description, a more integrated understanding of sensory perception and explorations of subjective and inter-subjective experience are distinctive strands of enquiry underpinning my search for alternative approaches to dance making.

### 1.3 Methodology

My approach to this practice-led research includes collaborative, cross-disciplinary studio work and writing as generative, reflective and analytical practices. Studio practice is grounded in improvisation, rule making and breaking and the incremental reworking of lines of enquiry. Writing is also a studio-based, processual practice alongside its documentary and summative role.

There are circumstances where the best or only way to shed light on a proposition, a principle, a material, a process or a function is to attempt to construct something, or to enact something, calculated to explore, embody or test it.

Archer (1995)

Documentation and writings are not translations of the artwork but serve to augment the articulating and evidencing of the research enquiry.

Nelson (2013:70)

This project treats the creative act of choreography as a base from which to explore the communicative potential of dance as a multi-sensory experience. Dancing, reading, thinking and sensory experience are in on-going exchange in a multi-modal inquiry that is rooted in contemporary approaches to practice research.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, during choreographic studio work, theoretical understanding is refined through the practice of choreography then through solitary reflection. The result is dynamic, dialogic interplay between the subjectivity of the thinking, vocal mover and

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<sup>6</sup> Barrett and Bolt (2007) Nelson R (2013) Practice Based Research in the Arts

the distanced perspective of the analytical observer.<sup>7</sup>

Studio practice provokes original and unpredicted effects and insights that would not materialise in a non-studio context. Practice-led research of this kind can look historically to *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) by Glaser and Strauss, social theorists who built on Heidegger's idea of 'praxical knowledge': in other words, theory and ideas that develop through practice, rather than the other way round.<sup>8</sup> As an instance of 'grounded theory', my approach allows my argument to be retrospectively choreographed through the creation and analysis of voiced, texted and described dances as embodied in *Dancing in the Dark* (2015). Theory emerges incrementally through the interaction of inductive and deductive approaches. To summarise this co-relationship, methodologies are 'necessarily emergent' owing to the reflexive nature of artistic practice, as Barrett and Bolt (2007:6) argue.

Studio writing is more than a catalogue of work done; it also serves a practical function in revealing the choreographies themselves. It exists as part of a body of choreographic work and is used to uncover as much as to record. I include swatches of this kind of writing italicized and set to the right margin. On performance writing, Ric Allsopp (1999:76) suggests,<sup>9</sup>

The benefit is its ability to map and link practices which are often unaware of each other and the new directions and initiatives which can emerge from such integration and framing.

In her 'critical supplement' to her practice-led doctoral thesis Dr. Claire MacDonald (2006) refers to Australian cultural critic, Paul Carter's (2004) argument that in writing from one form of practice to another (in her case from theatre to novel) there is a forward movement between different creative sites, a movement that can also define practice research:

'Shuttling back and forth' describes a physical movement from side to side, as a shuttle moves across a loom. In making that sideways movement it also moves forward, producing a textile, or fabric, and by analogy, text. This analogy speaks of a process not of creation but of generation, of bringing forth new form from existing

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin (1918) *The Dialogic Imagination*

<sup>8</sup> Glaser, B and Strauss, A (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Heidegger outlined in Barrett and Bolt (2007)

<sup>9</sup> Allsopp, R (1999) *Performance Writing in PAJ* via project muse

materials. The analogy suggests that all forms have histories; that they have prior material from which they are made.

The shuttling loom metaphor of the journeying between modes of creativity is also relevant to the reciprocity between studio and desk-based research. Michel Serres (1985:82) uses the metaphor of the loom in describing the embodied process of weaving and knowledge production:

The hand moves rapidly on the loom and distaff, around the needles, it creates the thread, twists it, threads it through, folds and knots it, the hand deftly splicing and lashing, unfailingly finding the gap beneath that the eye cannot see.

Serres expands on this saying that a weaver's craft:

...explores or exploits space by means of knots, proximities and continuities, without intervention from measurement, because their tactile manipulations anticipate topology.

Serres' use of this metaphor relates to the body's own knowledge: the kinaesthetic, proprioceptive and instinctive application of the physical self. He considers fabric and textiles as 'excellent models of knowledge, excellent almost abstract objects, primary varieties, the world is a heap of clothes' (ibid:83). The creation of cloth as it lengthens out of the loom encompasses both the shuttle's motion and its emerging pattern or texture. The weaver's glance down at the new edge and the look ahead to evaluate the fabric being made suggests the creative practitioner's dynamic condition of being simultaneously in, behind and in front of one's practice. I approach my studio practice, in a sense, by weaving together threads of theory and practice, choreographing and writing, and through both generative and reflective processes.

Experiments with AD have been carried out by analysing the guidelines available for good practice from agencies (including Vocaleyes and ADA) and government bodies (Ofcom, ACE) and then attempting to follow them in the studio, an almost impossible task as it turned out. However, the attempt became a method in itself, investigating AD's limits and potential. This research also applies a method of intuitive verbal description to investigate layers of performer and witness subjectivity, revealing their individual perspectives. This is outlined in Chapters 3 and 4.

Theoretical phenomenology, as set out in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1964) and Michel Serres (1985) uses description to study experiences of perception and embodiment. As Sondra Fraleigh (2013) says, phenomenology is 'a philosophical method that starts at zero, or tabula rasa thinking': it employs description to uncover, rethink and re-evaluate the familiar. Methodologically, my aim in bringing phenomenological philosophical approaches and choreographic practice together is to discover new readings of meaning in my performance works: to investigate new understandings of how sensory and kinaesthetic knowledge might build a more immersive experience of dance as a phenomena to be actively engaged in rather than observed. I approach phenomenology as a way of examining the experience of watching movement and of understanding more embodied processes of experiencing dance and sensory perception.

Conscious living in the body is familiar to me as a dancer-choreographer: tacit knowledge. A sense of the body is phenomenologically foregrounded. Choreography, my studio practice, unifies the senses in an integrated perceptive experience. My studio research is not an acting out of a dance that exists outside of the body, or the learning of steps to re-enact as a kind of empty echo but to embody the process of exploring and inhabiting an idea.

Building on this base, my engagement with ideas of embodiment is not conceptualised as a theoretical exercise. As I engage directly in the lived, embodied practice of dance, I consider Merleau-Ponty's and Serres' ideas on the 'lived body' through actual bodily and intellectual excursions<sup>10</sup>. This philosophy of embodiment is brought into conversation in this thesis, not with theories of practice, but with the actual practice of practice, which I access through in-depth, informed choreographic research.

The holistic approach (Merleau-Ponty 1968, Serres 1985) within phenomenology, and the focus on the moving, present body offers parallel insights for dance. The qualitative dynamics present in dance are also present in the movements and actions

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<sup>10</sup> Serres (2008) in *The Five Senses* refers to sight as 'visits' or 'excursions'



of everyday life. Our movement memories and empathies are all at play when we watch someone move as they are when we dance ourselves. The performance research incorporates opportunities for witnesses to engage with these dynamics.

Solo studio practice is used alongside working with other dance researchers: combining embodied, relational and observational research approaches. As a choreographer, my creative practice involves intense collaboration with dancers who each have distinct histories, expectations, interpretations and biases. The processes of collaborative research elicit a further complicating and enriching layer of inter-subjectivities and interactions.

Experimentation with researcher performers and witnesses is integral to the relational and interactive nature of the final performance practice, *Dancing in the Dark* (2015) and the studio research leading in to it. More generally, during periods of collaborative studio practice, the comments of individual performers, their voices, histories and memories are relevant to developing inquiries and have been treated as potentially illuminating contributions to the process.<sup>11</sup>

My choreographic process is embedded in communities of artists – performers, composers, choreographers and mentors, who generate a climate of ongoing feedback and discussion.<sup>12</sup> In my studio research, I employ a series of stop-start improvisational tasks to ensure the intentions of each particular enquiry remain in the foreground and that immediate responses can be shared and acted upon where appropriate. An improvisation might be repeated many times, for example, listening and responding to a recorded text, and after each repetition, discussion will encourage reflection and new direction can be given to instigate new responses.

My choreographic practice for the purposes of this research is task and improvisation-based rather than a series of performed moments. In other words, my studio research, following this methodology, aims to trigger unexpected results by exploring and

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<sup>11</sup> The dancers involved were recruited as paid professionals rehearsing, performing and reflecting artistically in a relevant choreographic context. The contribution of the performers' artistic efforts to my creation of textual and choreographic materials is duly acknowledged and thanked. I obviously have the full responsibility of artistic and intellectual authorship. As Clifford Geertz suggests, outcomes are all, by paradigmatic inevitability, personal (Geertz, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Satin (1996:56,135) It is common in the wider dance field to engage in collaboration with a range of artists in the creation of new performance work – designers, composers, digital artists.

revealing individual performer responses. The production of descriptions by the dance researchers offers alternative texts to those produced by a static observing witness.

This approach supports experimentation with how these ephemeral subjectivities and presences might be manipulated and directed to create new kinds of choreographies. Robin Nelson (2013:52) refers to Marina Abramovic's term, 'liquid knowledge' and the experiential knowledge that occurs through the embodied and intuitive processes of improvisation. Improvisation foregrounds the present, lived body and can articulate some of the complex perceptive nuances of experience. I am interested in how these might be made available in my work for performance. The relevant methodological point here is that when researching and exploring through improvisation, a lack of fidelity and stability can encourage original thinking.<sup>13</sup>

My practice research adopts an inter-disciplinary methodology. Live dance is used, as is video and sound recordings. In the studio I work with the dancing body, spoken and recorded voice, uncodified movement vocabularies and camera. Working with filmed dance points to a reflective methodological process that allows further exploration of the presences evoked by sound, suggestion and absence, further explored in Chapters 3 and 4. My method also includes interviews with artists and audio describers.

It is methodologically relevant that during my studio based choreographic enquiry, as in writing, there is a difference between the interrogation of an idea to understand its boundaries, purpose and potential and the identification and practical development of material for performance. There is, of course, a great deal of overlap between these two kinds of research and the research thesis (both choreography and writing) is itself both static and dynamic. The choreography and writing contain the processual as well as the performative. As this writing marks a moment in time by presenting the process and conclusions of this research journey, the choreography, *Dancing in the Dark* (2015), also embodies the process including references to exploration, uncertainty,

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<sup>13</sup> Reminiscent of the new approaches to improvisation that emerged out of the Judson Church and Grand Union dance groups (1960s and 70's) in the US, and X6 and the new dance movement in the 1970s and 80s in the UK. Contemporary Dance: American (Graham, Cunningham) and classical codified techniques were rejected and new explorations diversified through improvisation, release-based ideas and other revisionary approaches to questioning how and when our bodies are dancing and what a dancing body or experience is.

clarity, idiosyncrasy and conclusions as to how these ideas could be manifested in a completed piece of choreography, witnessed in a moment in time. The *Dancing in the Dark* performance is composite to this thesis.

#### 1.4 Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, Context Review, I set the scene for the research by introducing relevant literature and performance practice. I summarise the available guidance literature for audio-description from sector bodies including; ACE, Visualeyes, ADA and others. I also review practice from artists and companies making work relevant to this project including; Graeae Theatre Company, StopGAP Dance Company, Salamanda Tandem, Bock and Vincenzi, and I consider important context from Richard Bull and Bill T Jones. This review forms the starting point for my practical application of AD in the studio. Themes including the historical and contemporary context for AD, models of disability and translation are also introduced.

An exploration of the sensory realm is framed within a brief historical context. Perception is situated in terms of intersubjective experience as outlined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1964) and in Michel Serres' (2008) expansion of the 'lived body'. Sonic attention is introduced in relation to Michel Chion's (1994) ideas of synchresis and kinaesthetic attention in relation to Ann Cooper Albright (1997, 2007), John Martin (1933, 1939) and Susan Foster (2008, 2011).

In Chapter 3, Described Dances – Outside In, I outline a critical review of the current guidance for AD oriented by examples of my describing practice in the studio. This chapter charts the journey of describing observed choreographies, *A Woman Walks* (Smith 2009&12), *One Man Band* (Smith 2012), *Overdrive* (Alston 2003) and attempts to follow the available AD guidance.

Translation theory is approached to support exploration into the channel between the dance performance and the listener and to shed light on some of the ambiguities around narrative, meaning and role that are often present in contemporary dance. Dynamic and functional models of translation as identified by Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber (1964 and 1969) inform the progress of the research towards AD as a

more enterprising tool. Chapter 3 also summarises AD's restrictions and how they pose testing challenges for how spoken language and dance might co-habit. The important differences in how spoken language and sight operate and questions of individual interpretation and relationships between witnesses and performers are identified.

Chapter 4, *Described Dances - Inside Out*, maps the process of describing and performing actions simultaneously. Richard Bull's, *The Dance That Describes Itself* (1976) and Bill T Jones, *Floating The Tongue* (1979) are introduced as examples of choreographies that foreground the particular subjective commentaries of the performer as distinct aspects of the work. I draw on phenomenological approaches to method in one key piece of my studio research; *Into Knots* (2011), to consider how my descriptions might evolve beyond ideas of neutral observer and become more integrated within the choreography itself. I address how an alternative perspective of description (from the inside out) could propose new articulations of the experience of performance, providing a distinct artistic identity for a work.

The two film pieces embedded in Chapters 3 (FILM 1) and 4 (FILM 2) are recordings of specific processual studio practice referred to in the main text.

Chapter 5, *Unseen Choreographies*, explores the experience of dance performance as unseen: encompassing proximal, kinaesthetic and sonic presences. I refer to my studio practice, *1 O'clock* (2010), *...and I was like wow* (2012), *The Wrong Description* (2011) and Bock and Vincenzi's *Invisible Dances* (2011). These pieces of work explicitly address the unseen. This chapter also considers a broader, more integrated sensorium that takes account of a complex perceptive experience and that reorients the individual subjective experience itself as rich artistic material. Filmed footage of *The Wrong Description* (2011) and *1 O'clock* (2010) are included in FILM 3.

Choreography outlined in this chapter invites a new interface with witnesses, engaging through some of the complex subjectivities and interpretations that AD tries to avoid. This chapter is concerned with enlivening the senses via non-visual means and generating descriptions outside of AD or translation frames. The research begins to

explore a more complex and liberated perceptual realm in which the role of vision in perception and performance is both challenged and transformed towards a new perspective on making choreography.

Chapter 6, *Dancing in the Dark*, reflects on the project as a whole with particular reference to the performance outcomes embodied in *Dancing in the Dark* live performance research (FILM 4). The performance presents a range of sensory provocations to engage with the concepts of the project. The performance work intends to negotiate balances between ambiguity and essential 'meaning', inflection and direction and to put in place the conditions for enlivening the senses. The thesis culminates in this chapter and conclusions are presented here.

## 2. Context Review

Assessing audio description (AD) and addressing its challenges is a key theme of this research. I explore how verbal commentary can reveal aspects of the witness/performer experience and instigate new approaches to my choreographic processes. In this chapter, I introduce the available guidance for audio description from sector bodies including; Independent Television Commission (2000), Visualeyes (2003,2009), Audio Description Coalition (2007) and others. This includes guidance on AD in museums, television and other cultural settings as well as training for AD within higher education.<sup>14</sup> Themes, including the historical and contemporary context for AD and translation are introduced.

I introduce presence, absence and intersubjectivity informed by Merleau-Ponty (1942,1964) and approaches to perception with particular reference to the complexities of occupying both object and subject roles in the process of describing. Examples of performance works that explore the voice of the performer (Bull 1976, Jones 1979) are analysed with the intention of illuminating this challenge and activating new choreographic method. I also review practice from other companies making work relevant to this project (Graeae Theatre Company, StopGAP, Salamanda Tandem, Bock and Vincenzi).

Wider sensory understandings are introduced (Chion 1994, Serres 2008) to support the research as it moves away from conventional AD to explore the body as a sonic and kinaesthetically charged presence and new sense connections are identified.

### 2.1 Audio Description Guidelines and Translation

The current practice of AD is my starting point for this research. I am concerned to understand its function and find ways for it to be re-oriented so that it may become creatively productive. Advocated by UK and USA sector bodies, AD is a widely used service for visually impaired audiences. It aims to provide a verbal commentary of cultural and art events such as art gallery tours, theatre and dance performances. The commentary, usually live, is experienced via personal headset as a discreet

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<sup>14</sup> University Of Surrey (2004)

soundtrack describing visual action on stage. The audio describer's role is to fill the gaps, make the visual aural/oral and to keep listeners informed of the visual action for the duration of the production, 'I felt, as a totally blind person, that I received my full sight for a couple of hours' (Anon, Sadlers Wells 2009).<sup>15</sup>

As a form of mediation between stage events and non-sighted audiences, AD has been practised in the UK for the past seventeen years.<sup>16</sup> It emerged out of the encounter between cultural events and the discourse around social inclusion including disability and communication campaigning, bolstered by legislative support in the form of the Disability Discrimination Act (1994, 2005) and OFCOM regulations in the broadcast media.<sup>17</sup>

There is extensive guidance on good practice for audio-description (American Council of the Blind 2009; ITC 2000; OFCOM 2010; RNIB 2010) although reference to dance is limited and at times vague or contradictory. There is consensus on the use of certain linguistic rules, for example use of present tense and avoiding technical or stage vocabulary. The audio description should not assume or prescribe a meaning, aiming instead to be open enough for interpretation but harnessing some sense of completeness. AD aspires to an objectivity that is grounded in the idea that the describer is not an interpretive conduit but a functional service provider.

This key aspect of AD prevails across the guidance for good practice with the intention that a blind or partially sighted person can receive, 'the same factual information as a sighted person' (www.rnib.org.uk 2010). The intention is founded on the acknowledgement that more subjective or interpretive commentary reflects the effect the artwork is having on the describer, rather than the blind person. Cody and Margaret Pfanshtiel, (she is blind, he is not) are understood to be the founders of audio-description in the US state,

Being evaluative or interpretative is one of the biggest no-nos, I remember once

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<sup>15</sup> October 2009 audio described performance of *In the Spirit of Diaghilev* Sadler's Wells

<sup>16</sup> Haig 2005, [http://audiodescription.co.uk/uploads/general/WBU\\_Audio\\_Description\\_Toolkit\\_7.pdf](http://audiodescription.co.uk/uploads/general/WBU_Audio_Description_Toolkit_7.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> The Disability Discrimination Acts (DDA 1994, 2005) aimed to end the discrimination that many disabled people face. It gives disabled people rights in the areas of: employment, education, access to goods, facilities and services. [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

going with a novice describer to a performance of the Caine Mutiny. She said (into the earphone), 'He's leading the witness on.' I said, 'You don't do that. Blind people can hear, the problem is that they can't see. You're there to be the eyes, the color camera lens -- what comes in the eye goes out the mouth.'<sup>18</sup>

Research and reports (2003/9/10) regarding museum and art gallery access in recent years indicate that audio description is becoming more responsive to blind peoples' needs and that venues are improving their services.<sup>19</sup> As a significant marker of this shift in provision, there are numerous training opportunities available.

The University of Surrey (2004) offers a *Monolingual Subtitling and Audio-description* MA programme and explains, 'Audio describers provide spoken commentaries, which interpret visual images of various kinds, including those in films and in live theatre'. The course outline acknowledges the hermeneutic role of the describer but remains weighted toward the correlative relationship between image and speech. In conventional AD in theatre, the audio describer is positioned as a neutral witness, relaying a visual object, via the spoken word. A discreet, anchored subject examines an object, and extracts knowledge by means of a rational intellectual process and expresses this knowledge in words. Speech and visual image are presented in binary opposition. There is an assumption of a direct relationship between speech and the visual image to be interpreted: that visual imagery can be expressed in words.

## 2.2 Models of disability in AD

The advent of AD is a phenomenon resulting from the demands of visually impaired audiences, bolstered by the Disability Discrimination Acts (1994,2005). There are two principal hegemonic influences at work in current AD practice: that of the medical model of disability and the broadcasting profession's conception of the listening subject as a passive mass. Raina Haig (2002, 2005), a visually impaired film-maker, in her essays, explores the power forces that reinforce cultural stereotypes and flatten the complexities of the diversity of experience of blindness.

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<sup>18</sup> Date of quote unknown. Accessed online 2010 <http://www.washear.org/reuters.htm>

<sup>19</sup> RNIB Bollywood AD project 2010, Vocaleyes New Audiences Project – Talking Images 2003, Vocaleyes research Scottish Ballet 2008, Rambert 2009, Talking Dances – Northern Ballet Theatre 2007



The consideration of disability, and its definition as socially and culturally constructed as expressed in the social model, offers context for audio-description and its role. It is useful here because AD could be considered to have emerged out of the lobbying and advocacy of the disability rights movement to put an emphasis on society making adaptations for the disabled or non-sighted individual (social model). However AD is also criticised for reflecting a medical model of disability with its intention to 'help' people experience performance and other cultural experiences.

In Ofcom's *'Guidance on Standards for the Production and Presentation of Audiodescription'* (2000) the visually impaired person is positioned as the 'beneficiary' of audio description 'provision'. The charity, Royal National Institute for the Blind, declares on its website it is, 'for people with sight problems'. The definition of disability in medical terms is also adopted by the World Health Organisation (WHO), 'Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure'. Haig (2002) refers to these terms as having,<sup>20</sup>

'...a profound hegemonic effect on socio-cultural forms. So that cultural representations of the disabled person, in this case the blind or partially sighted person, are drawn, invariably, in terms of loss or lack.'

This can also be true about the language the audio describer chooses to use. Political correctness is a hazard in AD. Fear of using the 'wrong' terms to describe individuals could deter a describer from recognising the importance of cultural identity and therefore render race, gender and disabled identities invisible. A sighted audience can see immediately that there are black, female or disabled performers present on stage. A describer, inhibited by fear of offence, could negate difference in appearance in favour of an edited, homogenised view. The describer exposes an ideological position. Whether a performer's gender, race or impairment is important poses a challenge for the description. The commentary itself might be a site for a more discursive approach to ambiguity and identity.

Ambiguities and deliberate social agitation may be fixed or misrepresented by a describer who is not able to convey such uncertainty. Power relations can be

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<sup>20</sup> Online article – no page numbers.

reinforced under the medical model of disability. My interviews with visually-impaired and disabled artists and their collaborators (Salamanda Tandem, StopGAP, Kaz Langley, Lex Hibbert) support the view that AD's attempts to dispassionately translate 'visual to verbal' (ADA) are at best incomplete and at worst obscuring.

While watching a piece of dance on video, described by leading US describer Joel Snyder, I was struck by the way in which his commentary could influence the experience for the non-sighted listener. The choreography (*Phoenix Dance* by Karenina Epplein) seemed deliberately ambiguous in relation to the man's body (disabled/non disabled) however the AD blatantly revealed his lack of right leg, describing what was not there,<sup>21</sup>

His arms undulate at his sides as he rises to sitting. He poses with his right arm alongside his head while he looks down to where his right leg should be.

The model of AD as it is currently widely practiced, reflects a medical model of disability.<sup>22</sup> This way of approaching description assumes an aspiration to sight and in view of the above description, to an able or complete body. Snyder's commentary reveals his expectations of dancer or body to be two-legged and the importance he places on letting his audience know that it was lacking, despite the choreography maintaining ambiguity for much longer. It is an example of Haig's hegemonic force in action.

Considering AD within models of disability brings into focus the potential for exploring ideas of identity within the frame of description. While I do not aim to make work specifically for visually-impaired people or focus on disability, I am interested in what it is possible to learn from how models of disability take account of identity. The untangling and revealing of multiple expressions of presence as explored by performers in Graeae Theatre Company, StopGAP Dance Company and Aaron Williamson, an artist introduced on page 31, has a resonance with how I am approaching my descriptions. I do not attempt to represent or present a disabled or

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<sup>21</sup>Referenced online by SNYDER, J.2006 Audio Description – An Aid to Literacy. (no date) [www.audiodescribe.com/about/articles/ad\\_aid\\_to\\_literacy.doc](http://www.audiodescribe.com/about/articles/ad_aid_to_literacy.doc)

<sup>22</sup> The medical model of disability locates the disabled person as carrying a problem, which must be solved. It involves scrutiny of their 'condition', treatment of the impairment and adaptations to help them to function in an able-bodied world. This paradigm places the 'problem' of disability within the individual with treatments and services attempting to fix them: helping them find a way to function in an able-bodied world through therapies and other interventions. Audio-description can be situated as one of those 'aids'. Disabled-led groups vigorously reject the medical model.

visually-impaired perspective, rather to be informed by the necessary rethinking required when approaching choreography with different sensory engagements in mind: the idiosyncratic physical and verbal vocabularies evoked through devising processes that take the senses explicitly into account from the outset.

I avoid an approach that highlights the importance of sight (by imagining blindness and attempting to compensate for its lack). I aim instead to reconsider a range of sensory engagements. Georgina Kleege, a blind writer, refers to 'the hypothetical blind man' (2005:179). Her cliché of a sighted population's understanding of blindness is created out of her response to the limited knowledge, in the sighted population, of the way in which a lack of sight is accounted for in day-to-day life. Kleege, (in Davis 2006:391) discusses how an attempt to imagine what it is like to be blind is not useful and distorts the lived, diverse experience of many blind people.

Both Kleege and Brian Magee and Martin Milligan (1995:46) in *On Blindness*, refer to a 'visionist' attitude that places sight as a fundamental aspect of human existence. Magee states, 'By the sighted, seeing is felt as a need' (ibid:104). In studio exercises involving closing the eyes, it is very common for sighted participants to feel a sense of panic about their safety or the unpredictability of the world around them. Sight could even be considered to be inhibiting of the other senses and according to Kleege, limits a sighted understanding of one's own perceptions. For example she explains that shapes and visual phenomena have more than a visual representation but often they are thought to be outside of the realm of her perception (2006:394).

I am interested in the repositioning of the unseen as something other than non-sight. In a reversal of the question of whether a person is 'completely blind', Arthur Danto (1999:35) in a review of Kleege's book, *Sight Unseen* (1998) questions whether there is such a phenomena as 'total vision'. His questioning of the binary sight/non-sight is relevant to this research in terms of the attempt to 'fill the gaps' with commentary through AD. These writers on blindness offer an alternative perspective on the visionist weighting towards pity (Kleege 2005), prevalent in a medical model of disability, that can inhibit new equalities in cultural participation. They suggest that non-sight can offer valid and enlightening perspectives for all witnesses.

Introduced by John Swain and Sally French in their 2000 article published in *Disability and Society* and developed principally by the disability art movement, the Affirmative Model aims to counter the personal tragedy narrative of the medical model and be more expansive and responsive than the social model. Colin Cameron, a disabled academic in an interview for Disability Arts Online (2009) says,

The Affirmative Model was proposed as an idea to enable us to recall that, actually, our impairments are a core part of our being and of our experience...Identity isn't something solid, fixed, once and for all. Identity is something that is fluid, changing, that takes shape through the decisions and choices we make in everyday life.

While the social model offers an important shift in political advancement for disabled people in society, it is not capable of representing the huge diversity of experience of disability. Aaron Williamson, a deaf artist, in *Art Becomes You* (2004:52), questions whether the social model is a complex enough frame for art-making. He discusses art as, 'a contested site of definition that thrives on radical enquiry'. In the light of this, Williamson suggests a, 'discursive model' (ibid:53) whereby disability is informed by discourse. This approach to disability allows for new insights and interpretations. Within a discursive model, meaning is polysemic and 'malleable' (ibid:56) incorporating individuals' interactions and exchanges with others. This approach can allow for multiple and diverse disabled experiences to be expressed through new artworks that do not confine them through self-limiting conceptual frames.

In the shadow of the medical model of disability, the inherent power relations at play in conventional AD include the perception of blind or visually impaired people as medical patient or as vulnerable 'other': needing expert help to participate in the art or cultural event. Kwame Anthony Appiah's model for cross-cultural engagement introduced in *Thick Translation* (1993) offers a useful parallel for an expanded model of AD and the potential power relations between translator and receiver in my choreographic performance research.

Appiah's writings on the slippage or mismatch between cultural understandings of a text between languages have opened up space for parallels in the power dynamics

between describer and audience. Appiah's thick translation model is considered in the context of the production of meaning in AD. In other words, it is an example of how providing multiple layers of commentary rather than a single voice might offer a range of interpretations from which a listener might navigate their own meanings.

Appiah asks how it is possible to transcend this problem in linguistic translation. He proposes that his model of 'thick translation' (1993) can locate a text in a rich cultural context so as to account for difference and diversity among communities. He proposes that translation, interpretation and description are played out in the same discursive space entering a dynamic relationship between words, concepts, categories and discourses. Thick translation can offer a more discursive approach to AD by paying attention to the range of similarities, differences and contradictions it invites. For the purposes of this research, thicker models of description might open a more reflexive disposition with regards to the rules and guidelines for AD.

The theoretical oppositions between formal and dynamic equivalence as identified by Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber (1964 and 1969) can be used to help map the territory of translating one language to another and in my case, dance from visual to verbal. Post-structural analysis of translation is concerned more with functional understanding of the subject text or to use Nida and Taber's (1969) terminology, a 'dynamic equivalence'. Formal equivalence is concerned with accuracy and fidelity to the subject text and 'focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content'. In terms of AD for dance this could reflect the objective, more mechanical intentions. 'Dynamic equivalence' is based upon 'the principle of equivalent effect' (ibid:159). This dynamic equivalence, or functional translation, seeks to replicate an equivalent effect on its target audience and is concerned with how it is connected to receivers. Dynamic equivalence advocates a hermeneutic approach that can shift according to cultural and social situations and the creative values of the subject text and target audience.

Almost as if it is yet to catch up with academics and artists developing a more discursive, affirmative model of disability, AD fulfils the role of bolt-on translation: a response to a medical model of disability, an attempt to respond to a 'problem'. An

example of a more affirmative approach to AD is demonstrated by Graeae Theatre Company's presentation of multiple communication modes as explored below in 2.3. Other examples of a more creative approach to spoken aspects of performance are also introduced here.

### **2.3 Speaking of Performance**

Graeae Theatre Company offers an alternative to the conventional model for AD in performance. It uses audio-description as an integral component in the creation of new work. The company places difference in access and communication modes at the centre of their devising and performance work. Their staged work is a multi-layered experience incorporating speech, British Sign Language, sub-titles and audio description. Information is relayed often concurrently in two or three different modes. With this at the foundation of the work, it offers artistic possibilities in the interaction between performers on stage and with audience that segregating it as a separate function would not. Jenny Sealey (2009), Artistic Director, describes this as the 'aesthetics of access'.

Exploring the aesthetics of access, we're in a position to find things out creatively... We layer the work: words, music, visuals tell the story. It's multi-sensory. There are so many ways to communicate and collaborate.

For Graeae Theatre Company, a fundamental acceptance of difference in how people communicate directly challenges the notion of the hierarchy of the senses in theatre and the ownership of cultural modes of production by the non-disabled. The premise being that if the core fabric of the work is inclusive and encompasses a diversity of expressive idioms, it should need no additional translating for a diverse audience. The work reflects and incorporates a range of communicative modes existing as part of its original score. Seen through the lens of the affirmative model of disability, this method, as a reflection of the diversity of the cast and wider society, repositions those with sensory impairments as equal receivers (and makers) of the work. For the purposes of this research, Graeae's model brings into focus the importance of recognising and acknowledging the different modes available for understanding what is happening in a choreography. Kinaesthetic, aural and proximal information all play a role in the experience of dance performance. This is a key concept.

Salamanda Tandem is a dance company led by Artistic Director, Isabel Jones. The company works with,

‘a wide spectrum of people to create artworks primarily derived from sensory experience. It specialises in the performance of collective, multi-media events shaped around the distinctive abilities of the people who participate.’

[www.salamanda-tandem.org](http://www.salamanda-tandem.org)

Jones’ collaborators are often visually impaired. Their work is often described or draws on the experiences of visual impairment to inform the themes, for example by expressing thoughts of performers or by producing spoken imagery that might or might not, refer to movement material. The texts offer another surface for inscribing meaning rather than an interpretation of a visual act. Sometimes they are spoken by the performers themselves and sometimes they are played over sound system concurrent to the choreography. Echoing Sealey’s comment about the aesthetics of access, the visually impaired experience instigates artistic content. *White Cane* (2015) is initiated from the perspective of a visually-impaired long cane user’s movement and the sounds made by the stick against the ground. Of their work, *Bodycam* (1996), Jones explains,

Textures, forms and sounds were created that make up the Bodycam installation, these are not pure descriptions of the world or of a specific place but come from our sensory response to it.

StopGAP Dance Company describes itself as, ‘a contemporary dance company consisting of dancers with and without disabilities’.<sup>23</sup> The company works closely with a collaborating artist to write their own audio-descriptions, as opposed to texts being provided by a theatrical venue or external agent. Vicki Balaam (2011), Artistic Director at the time of interview, prefers to work with the describer as part of the creative process and is determined that the description be part of the artistic fabric of the work.

We see AD as much more than an access tool for a few blind members of the audience. For us it is very much about providing another layer of the artistic work and we want it to encapsulate as much of the texture and complexity of the choreography as possible and to enable our audiences, both sighted and unsighted to benefit from another aspect of the work.

These approaches to addressing difference in audience sensory engagements have emerged through artistic endeavour rather than through description or access

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<sup>23</sup> A Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO) of Arts Council England, StopGAP is the UK’s top integrated dance company working on the small-to-middle scale and leads this field across the World. [www.stopgap.uk.com](http://www.stopgap.uk.com)

services. Criticism of this approach includes the lack of rigour and objectivity in the textual content and a dismissal of the idea that the descriptions could offer artistic content themselves.<sup>24</sup> The tensions between the perceived demand for AD and the creative manipulation of text, often by visually-impaired or disabled artists themselves, reveal an unsettled and contested landscape.<sup>25</sup>

I now introduce speaking dances that explore the voice of the performer. Richard Bull's work, *The Dance that Describes Itself* (1973) and Susan Foster's commentary on this work *Dances that Describe Themselves* (2002) address the subjective body in contemporary dance and explore the voice that emerges from within the choreographies themselves. In Bull's piece the dancers speak to describe their actions and to share their commentary on the dance they are performing. It sometimes includes dialogue with other performers or comments addressed directly to the audience.

Cooper Albright (1997:5) refers to dance in the west as having existed, 'in a semiotic vacuum, outside of language and meaning' and Bull's work played explicitly with Martha Graham's view that, 'movement never lies' cited in Foster (2002:171). Bull found a role for voice that played with this conception of speech as a 'contaminant of the purity of the muted communication of the body' (ibid:171).

As an alternative model for the role of the describing voice in performance, *The Dance that Describes Itself* (1973) is an important historical orientation point for this research. Foster addresses multiple aspects of the work including, transcription of actions, analysis of the choreographic development of the dance, the subjectivities of the experience of the individual performer and the fragmentary nature of interpretation and meaning. As a model for addressing the need for a thickening in AD and for exploring identity or presence, Bull's (1973) work and Foster's (2002:175) writing explore in depth, many layers of meaning and representation.

'fleeting references to the action as it vanished, verbal offerings delineated a complex web of references to dancers and dance...Thus even as the talking created an ambience both

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24 Studio research with Hibbert (2010), Theatre Royal (2011)

25 ACE report (2003) found that as many people found AD helpful as unhelpful



casual and intimate the layers of references – connecting different dancers' utterances to each other and to movements – increased exponentially as the dance progressed'

Making work during the same period, and also playing with ideas of the live, spoken presence of the performer, Bill T Jones, (1979, 1981) experimented with spoken commentaries on the construction of choreographies and the possible layering of meanings in specific movements. Referring to Bull, Jones and others in this period, Foster says, 'Their talking dances, endlessly complex, sustain an open-ended, ever-expanding, reinventing of meaning' (Foster 2002:207).<sup>26</sup> In relation to my own choreography this is a useful orientation point for approaching description as a method for expanding possible expressions of meaning with witnesses.

These talking dances in the 1970s, reverberate in the contemporary works of Wendy Houston during which she provides commentaries, reflections, projections, insecurities, assumptions and revelations of the act of performing.<sup>27</sup> These, often fragmented snatches of thought interweave complex perspectives that expand the movement into suggestions for how to understand Houston's performance as a tiny fragment of what could be/have been. They acknowledge the importance and power of the audience in rendering its meaning. Foster (ibid:207), on the talking dances of Bull and Jones, could also be read as relevant to Houston, '(they) free the movement semantically and offer suggestions as to how to interpret it, giving it significance so that the dancing no longer dwells in a realm apart.'

These dances expose a conceptualisation of the performing body as being in process, or caught between performing and non-performing presences. The explication of the making and revising of the dance as process during performance recalls the work of Williamson (2004) and the discursive model. The works admit that their meaning is undefined, slippery and subject to multiple readings. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1979:39) has suggested that a dancer can momentarily lose the dance, or change her presence within it while performing by becoming self-conscious on stage:

...as the dancer reflects upon herself apart from the dance that she is no longer one with it, and in consequence, destroys the illusion. It is evident in performance when a dancer becomes explicitly aware of herself. As soon as she becomes self-

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<sup>26</sup>Rainer, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Jones.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Houston is a solo performer. Recent works; *Keep Dancing* (2010), *Haunted, Daunted and Flaunted*, *Happy Hour* (2001) *The 48 Almost Love Lyrics* (2003).

conscious, the audience is aware of a separation of the dancer from the dance. What appears, then, is not a single phenomenon, an illusion of force, but a physical body and movement which emanates from that body. The body and the movement appear as separate and distinct phenomena because the dancer is no longer pre-reflectively aware of her body in movement as a form-in-the making.

An expression of this phenomena could be considered to be present in the above work of Bull, Jones and Houston: the space between enacting learned dances and the process of creating them. Sheets-Johnstone refers to a separation between the dancer and the dance. The uncovering of this layer of tension as a distinct performance quality reveals a presence ordinarily absent in performance.

The impact of these works on my research is to offer a model for foregrounding the questions of ambiguity explored further in Chapters 3 & 4.

## **2.4 Approaching Perception**

This section sets out the context for how the senses and perception are addressed in this research process. In the following section I introduce how I frame research that addresses a more integrated sensory understanding by briefly contextualising the senses historically. I introduce kinaesthetic awareness, my approach to 'listening' and the audio-visual contract with reference to Michel Chion (1994), Erving Goffman (1959, 1974) and Bock and Vincenzi (2003). I also go on to specify how I am approaching themes of subjectivity and perception.

Prior to the Victorian sanitisation of theatre practises, performance events were likely to have been more immersive, encompassing participation, song, theatre, dance and other spectacles. With the introduction of the proscenium arch and the increasing distance from and professionalising of performers, audiences became a body or mass looking towards a raised platform. A clear and shared line of vision became the predominant mode of attention.

The shift from multidirectional participatory event to viewing from a static point, defined the changes in perspective of the enlightened age and served as a precursor to the development of the printing press and later of photography and film-making. There was a shift from active participant to cool observer. Vision dominated in this

iconic landscape where symbolism replaced participation and meaning was embedded in sight: the proximal senses of touch and smell were ignored, belittled or debased.

Sight, and seeing, is culturally directed. The tendency to authorise language and writing as holding the greatest wealth of knowledge and power, privileges sight as our leading and most important sense: the sense of verification and truth.<sup>28</sup> In *The Senses in Performance*, Banes and Lepecki (2007:1) introduce the senses as, 'historically bound cultural agents, constantly being activated and repressed, reinvented and reproduced, rehearsed and improvised.

This approach to understanding how the primacy of sight has come to dominate in the socio-cultural interaction, opens up a perspective on AD through the prism of a cultural history shaped by and through the body.<sup>29</sup> David Howes (1991) explains that in the European philosophical tradition, bodily experience is patterned as the five senses, then divided to the intellectual or distanced senses: sight and hearing, and the proximal (smell, taste, touch). He identifies kinaesthesia as a hole in sensorium.

The complexity of the sensory realm is explored for the purposes of this research as incorporating kinaesthetic and 'felt' sensation. As early as 1933 John Martin had introduced the term 'meta-kinesis' (1933:13) and 'inner mimicry' (1939:42-54). Martin proposed that metakinesis was the physiological responses of the witness to the dancer. When watching dance movements Martin (ibid:12) explains,

You have no difficulty in following their meaning because you have often done them yourself ... instantaneously, through a sympathetic muscular memory you associate the movement with its purpose.

A process of movement exchange between the performer and the witness initially takes place passively through the eyes and ears. The process of perception then goes

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28 This shift can be seen to be echoed or played out in the way our theatrical habits and conventions have evolved from the strictly hierarchical power plays of the 14th century ballets in courts across Europe where dramatic vignettes reinforced the position of royalty and dignitaries, to the messy participation in medieval feasting where dancing, music, drama and eating spilled across banqueting tables blurring and confusing roles of performer/participant.

29 As writing replaced oral histories as the dominant mode of cultural exchange, the importance and prominence of those that could read and write shifted to put into shadow the skills and eminence of community storytellers and orators. This had massive implications for the cultural means of production. As people started reading poetry and prose instead of listening to it, vision and literacy became essential means of engaging in and contributing to society and sight began to dominate in the socio-cultural interaction.

on to evoke a feeling deep within the spectator's own body, through what Martin calls the 'sixth sense' of 'muscular sympathy' (ibid:11-13).

While Martin's theory of kinaesthetic empathy has been criticised for being unable to account for differences between respondents, its premise has been further explored through more contemporary neuroscience research into mirror neurons which has mapped the responses of the brain when watching dance or listening to music.<sup>30</sup> However, my project is not focused on audience research into the empathetic experience of watching a dance, rather on how the choreographic process can invite a wider range of perceptive engagements.<sup>31</sup>

My approach to listening has been informed by Michel Chion (1993,94,99)<sup>32</sup>. Chion explores the effects and structures of audio-visual relationships in film. His work relating to off- and on-screen sound analyses the impact and affect of the visual presence of the source of sound. He identifies that a sound on film is either associated with its visual source or that it is heard off screen. The visualised or 'diagetic' sound connected to source from the outset allows an act or atmosphere to be securely established.<sup>33</sup> This relationship allows for the sound to be classified and identified with an image and that source could 'reappear' via the sound alone at a different point in the film. Chion refers to an 'audio-visual contract' and the process of cerebral synthesis that takes place when making sense of what we hear in relation to what we see.

Chion uses the term 'synchresis' (1994) to label this methodological approach, which entails the merging of synchronism and synthesis to describe the meshing of knowledge that constitutes our understanding of audio-visual information. Synchresis takes place when a stream of audio and visual events are played. Certain audiovisual combinations come together through synchresis and reinforce each other. Leigh Landy (2007:91) on Chion refers to the 'dynamic of synchresis', with 'dynamic'

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30 Foster (1998), Franko (2002) criticised a lack of ability to take account of difference and irrationality. A theory of mirror neurons was developed by Vittorio Gallese and colleagues University of Parma (Gallese 1996, 1998). Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) theory of 'Einfühlung' underpins Martin's work on 'inner mimesis'.

31 Kinaesthetic empathy is explored in AHRC funded Watching Dance:Kinaesthetic Empathy Manchester University 2008-11 [www.watchingdance.org](http://www.watchingdance.org)

32 and his analysis of Pierre Schaeffer's, *Le Traité des Objets Musicaux* (1952) and *La Musique Concrete* (1967).

33 Meaning connected to its visual source on screen.

describing the particularly active and multisensory attentive process, 'the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears' (Chion 1990:5). This is relevant for this research as it supports the investigations into reconsidering sonic presences of the body and the relationship between sight and hearing.

Insights into how sight is understood as being integrated into wider socio-cultural interactions are introduced by sociologist, Erving Goffmann (1959,1967,1974). Goffman's social theories sit alongside the guidance for AD to support my analysis of textual theatrical possibilities of the entire interactive 'performance'. His analysis of non-verbal and human interaction behaviours in social settings propose that they have influence on the nature and quality of communication. His use of the term 'performance' to mean any social interaction and his emphasis on the initial framing of an engagement as being central to its understanding by each party, introduces a method for accounting for and illuminating issues of the agreed unseen elements of theatre.

Goffman (1967) uses the concept of 'keying' to explain how social interactions are initiated and as a way of signaling meaning. He writes about the process of establishing both etiquette for the exchange and a collaborative expectancy from the audience: that the subject and receiver undergo a process of 'gelling' to lubricate the ensuing exchange. They also relate to and feed into aspects of intersubjectivity explored in chapter 4.

I frame this research within the context of active perceptive and sensory processes with and between performers. Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity supports a practical and theoretical investigation into the many-layered relationships present in performing and witnessing. Merleau-Ponty (1964:106) expresses an account of a body for self and a body for others and that there is a flow between these two subject/object bodies. This can be thought of as a catalyst for exploring the relationships between witness and performers and between the concurrent subject/object identities of the performer. This enquiry examines the different layers that can be drawn out and foregrounded, inhibited or shadowed in these relationships.

My describing practice in the studio demands attention to intersubjectivity between performers and witnesses and to the fluctuating absences and presences of phenomenological enquiry. This active attention to the experiential nature of dance performance marks a search for what is essential in an individual's engagement with the dance and on the reciprocity between witness and performer. Sondra Fraleigh (1987:7) writes that, 'consciousness is intentional: it depends on one's perceptual attention to phenomena. Phenomenology stresses that consciousness is an activity, not a passivity'.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges a lack of definition between the senses and the inevitable presence of temporality, association and memory in perception and introduces the concept of entanglement with the sensed phenomena. Merleau-Ponty, (1964:146) addresses the totality of the bodily affects of relating to and understanding the world. He describes seeing something as a,

bursting forth of the mass of the body toward the things, which...makes me follow with my eyes the movements and the contours of the things themselves.

The embodied sensory experience of looking and understanding, as outlined by Merleau-Ponty, is directed forward like vision. Merleau-Ponty's proposition of an intercorporeal self suggests a subjectivity in which the senses intermingle but which is led by and verified by sight. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1942:90-94), Merleau-Ponty addresses the body as both internal subject and external object of experience. I understand the reciprocal experience of iterated empathy as relevant to kinaesthetic and non-visual perceptive sensibilities. However, despite his attention on intercorporeality, and his view that the senses are not well defined or isolated, his writing is weighted towards a visual encounter with the world. This means that I look to Michel Serres writing on the sensate body for a more integrated understanding of experiencing perception: to question vision as a distinct sensory authority.

In *The Five Senses*, (1985) Serres develops his philosophy of mingled bodies – the body as not before the world, but in it. He considers sensory perception as a holistic, cross-referencing experience in itself, rather than the prioritisation of one sense over another or how they might compensate for one another's deficit. He suggests sight holds a disproportionate emphasis in perception and that this is a result of a

hyperliterate society that has allowed language to stifle the vigour and power of the other senses.

Serres attempts to write an experience of the world from the body. In *The Five Senses* (1985) he takes us through many physical acts and experiments that reveal consciousness as residing not in the mind but in the whole body or in the energy and joy of bounding whole body movements. Serres criticises Merleau-Ponty's focus on language (and sight) as a kind of damper pedal for experience. Serres finds the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty 'bodiless', removed from its very beginnings from the sensate body. Steve Connor (2009:1) writes that Serres produced *The Five Senses*, 'out of a laughing revulsion for his (Merleau-Ponty's) emaciated phenomenology'.

Despite imagining perception as an intermingling between senses and sensed phenomena, Merleau-Ponty's sight-dominant phenomenology has its limitations when considering dance performance as a multi-sensory experience. Live performance relies on the opening up and entangling of the totality of our perceptive system including our kinaesthetic and vestibular senses. The complexity and importance of this effect of 'liveness' or multiple presences, as something other than sound and vision has been a recurring theme in this research, and a key factor in making my own new choreography for performance.

A key example of an unseen manifestation of bodily presence is Bock and Vincenzi's (2003) work, *Invisible Dances....from afar: a show that will never be shown*. This work questioned how an audience could 'experience how a poetic world that is open to the personal interpretation of those present is translated; how (do) you describe the indescribable?' (Templeton 2004). The piece was heard only by telephone after the event and was never performed in front of an audience.

*Invisible Dances*, took the subjectivity of a 'second hand' description and presented it as the only way to experience the work. It demanded that audiences refocused attention, to accept the way in which the work was being made available, as core: as a distinctive feature of the work. While this work was not a deliberate attempt to disrupt the relationship between a translator or describer of dance performance (within the

frame of AD for blind audiences), in its acts of exploring and questioning presence and absence in performance and whether all is ever visible, its territory resonates with this research.

My aim, to explore and assess immersive sensory experiences of dance by integrating sensory and kinaesthetic forms of knowledge is supported by exploring the context as summarised in this chapter. Witness and performer engagements are developed in the context of describing choreographies, provoking sensory engagements with and between performers and investigating the relationships between the senses including kinaesthetic, sonic and proximal, to create choreographies that re-order the primacy of vision.

Chapter 3 attends to the analysis of AD through studio practice and the available guidelines and literature concerned with its delivery. This leads into more integrated consideration of the sensorium and close analysis of specific pieces of my choreographic practice.



## Chapter 3 Described Dances – Outside In [FILM 1]

[FILM 1 refers to *A Woman Walks* (2009&2012) and *One Man Band* (2011)]

Described Dances - Outside In, identifies particular challenges in my application of AD in the studio and includes a critical response to these efforts. An observing witness or witnesses outside of the choreography, looking in, initiate these descriptions. I refer to my own choreography, *A Woman Walks* (2009&2012) and Richard Alston Company, *Overdrive* (2003). This section also includes insights from two companies in relation to AD in practice, StopGAP Dance Company and Gecko Theatre Company. These contributions introduce how ambiguity and choices about how descriptions are included in a work might influence its core meaning and how it is presented to others. This section discusses how AD is inevitably concerned to describe far less than is seen or is possible to see.

In Outside In, the available guidance for AD is tested in the studio. I approach models of translation in order to consider the function and effectiveness of AD and to support my examination of some of the challenges that emerge. Identifying particular types of translation supports the questioning of a descriptive commentary to convey a sense of purpose or equivalence. Consideration of Kwame Anthony Appiah's work, *Thick Translation* (2008) also informs my studio process.

### 3.1 A Woman Walks

*Enters from right. Walks to centre and turns to face front. Leans into right hip. Walks forward and stops. Hand to chest. Quick. Right arm straight high diagonal. Extends. Body leans forward and balances on one leg, arms to side and sway side to side, uneven. Body straightens and left knee up. Head up. Balance. Foot, spine, hips circle even-paced around the spot. Face stays away from front. Faces back. Arms cross. Looks back to front.*

Smith (2009)

This short text and the first section of the film, *A Woman Walks* (2009), were part of the first piece of choreography I made for performance during this research. My initial task was to follow the rules of AD in terms of remaining neutral, using present tense

and avoiding technical or stage vocabulary. The audio-description was not to assume or prescribe a meaning, aiming instead to offer some sense of filling a visual gap. There are two versions of *A Woman Walks* (2009) on FILM 1. The solo is dated 2009 and the duet is a reworking dated 2012.

The audio describer in conventional AD is positioned as a neutral witness. As a practical starting point, I needed to find a way of separating my experience of dancing from my description of it. Speech and visual image are presented in binary opposition throughout AD guidance, as outlined in Chapter 2, and so to facilitate this oppositional relationship I needed to create a method whereby I could observe myself. The process developed by recording a verbal description of an imaginary choreography then dancing and filming it. I could then develop further descriptions by watching the film.

The premise of a direct relationship between speech and the visual image to be interpreted: that visual imagery can be expressed in words, was challenging in practice. My attempts to keep interpretative language relating to quality or feel out of my description left a rather mechanical text but I was mindful of my blind colleague, Lex Hibbert's (2010) comment that listening to a piece of music, she was able to experience it first-hand, 'as it was intended', whereas when she listened to audio-described dance she felt the performance was refracted through another lens.<sup>34</sup> She explained that this got less satisfactory the more the describer incorporated their own emotional or expressive response to what they were seeing.

AD guidance refers, sometimes rather vaguely, to the need to capture what is 'essential' or 'necessary' to an artwork. For example the Audio Description Associates explain that, 'The artist must recognize the beautiful and eliminate the unessential' (Snyder, 1995:16) and the Independent Television Commission (2000:) states that, 'The programme should be allowed to breathe from time to time...too much description can dilute the mood of a scene'. This lack of clarity nevertheless highlighted an interesting proposition for my studio work, to take account of both

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<sup>34</sup> Dialogue as part of studio research

the need for directional and mechanical detail and the articulation of the artistically 'essential'.

In his book, *Seen/Unseen: A Guide to Active Seeing* (1995:34), the photographer, John Schaefer, uses the term 'visual literacy' to describe the process of becoming an 'active seer'. Cited by both Audio Description Associates and The American Council of the Blind as a key skill for AD, Schaefer refers to the need to 'increase your level of awareness and become an active 'see-er'. Joe Clark (2010) adds (in speaking of description for media), 'Describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe.' Far from being about Pfanstiehl's (1995), 'what goes in the eyes comes out the mouth', the act of AD is asserted across the advisory organisations as a process of careful selection,

However tempting it is to use colourful imagery and elegant turns of phrase, clarity is the main aim of audio description. The describer must learn to weed out what is not essential. Too much description can dilute the mood of a scene...Describers should not voice a personal opinion or interpret events.  
Ofcom AD guidelines 2010

...it is too easy for a sighted person to be 'contaminated' by the visual aspects of a scene and thus provide a less useful evaluation of what needs to be said or not said.  
Pfanstiehl 1995

Listening back to my first descriptions of *A Woman Walks* (2009), they felt dry and mechanical and removed from the actual 'feel' of the dance. I wanted to explore more evocative language. The following text is the second part of the solo, which expands on the first description by exploring more metaphoric and relational descriptions.

*A woman walks into the room and turns to face us. She sits into one hip, 'you are looking at me'. She comes towards us, sees us. She suddenly holds her heart and stops. She reaches out the arm, watching her hand. Her torso undulates to go a little further. She falls forward then lies flat over one leg. Spread like a bird surveying the landscape below. Now she stands storklike, knee high. The mood changes with curving, sweeping limbs circling around her. She's hiding something. Keeping something from us. She faces back, holds her body tight and looks over her shoulder to us.*

Smith (2010)

As I experimented with different descriptions I was aware of the multitude of possibilities present within each moment of movement. The speed at which I was able to absorb information visually could not possibly be articulated verbally. To see is not static, just as existence and experience are not static. We situate ourselves in relation to something: place what we see in relation to ourselves. My process of trying to describe simply and functionally was leading towards questions of intersubjectivity, to be explored later in Chapter 4 Described Dances – Inside Out. On this mutual perceiving, Merleau- Ponty (1964:31) said, 'I do not see how anyone could posit the other without the self; it is an impossibility for my experience'.

As a describer I was attempting to communicate my view. Unsighted listeners are directed by the singularity of an audio-describer's interpretation of what they see. Just as photography fixes the photographer's standpoint as much as captures a 'view', the audio-description says as much about the describer as it does about the described. As every photograph, performance or reproduced image embodies a way of seeing, each live audio-description is a way of seeing, captured in the boundaries of its limitations.

The impossibility of conveying all that is seen is acknowledged and dealt with by AD organisations through the advocacy of a process of editing. This awareness of the difficulty with an objective description is not fully resolved by AD's advocates, it is rather highlighted as a potential 'mistake' to be avoided.

The eye is quicker than the fastest of mouths...There may be seven or eight things that you would like to take up but you won't have time for but three or four -- you have to prioritize.  
Pfanstiehl 1995

According to industry guidance, a described performance should include attention to performers' bodies, actions and demeanour. I was beginning to think about seeing as a continually moving process in which I was actively selecting and suspending multiple interpretations across and through the depth and breadth of field around me. While acknowledging that attempts at objectivity can produce information about stage set and physical appearance, my choreography often

embodies ambiguity and suggestion in order to set in motion a range of interpretive possibilities for witnesses.

One of the guiding principles of AD is to not to refer to technical or stage terminology<sup>35</sup>. Whereas this may be appropriate when describing a traditionally staged play or classical ballet, for example a character leaves a room or inhabits a recognisable environment, a minimally staged or abstract production common in contemporary dance, requires a vocabulary that reflects its pared down or exposed aesthetic.

The question of where to strike the balance between the mechanical relaying of information and artistic interpretation emerged as a problem in *A Woman Walks*. The solo should include information on the mechanics of the moving body; direction, level, speed: the domestic topography of the performance. This would need to sit alongside other clues to its distinctive performative allure in order to reflect my desire to retain or enhance an ambiguity in my work.

Personal opinion or interpretation should be avoided, but an editing out of non-essential information is required. Achieving clarity about the essential expressive fabric of a work requires conveying some of the work's subjective charisma. This involves an interpretation of the work, in order to convey its artistic meaning. Identifying that meaning as an objective phenomenon is in tension with the function of AD as a neutral witness. In order to facilitate interpretation, a description must do more than relay a parched, mechanical tracking of direction, speed and identification of 'characters'. I question whether an audio description can operate without a third-party account of its meanings.

With my questions around how objective descriptions could take account of the tension identified above, I invited responses from the team of audio-describers at The Theatre Royal in Plymouth (2010). I aimed to shed light on how it might be possible to account for the artistic or more subjective charisma of a choreography. It came across

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<sup>35</sup> Interview Theatre Royal 2011 and Snyder (2006, 2010)

strongly that explicitly subjective interpretations of a dance work were not acceptable in an audio description. There was reluctance from the audio describers to acknowledge that the essence of contemporary dance choreography might be more successfully conveyed through a range of subjective suggestions or readings. I suggested that access to a number of different simultaneous readings of a dance work might offer more multi-faceted access to the work without reducing it to a refraction through a single third party lens.

The lack of agility of my vocabulary, the balance between mechanical and poetic texts and ideas of the neutral witness emerge as unresolved challenges in my descriptions of *A Woman Walks*. With a lack of linear narrative and reference points it proves testing for me and the interview at Theatre Royal Plymouth suggests it is overwhelming for their audio-describers to attempt to follow the rules of conventional AD for dance productions. At the time of interview the Theatre Royal did not provide AD for Rambert Dance Company, for example, as it was considered, 'not suitable for description'.

To support exploration into the channel between the dance performance and the listener and to shed light on some of the ambiguities around narrative, meaning and role that are often present in contemporary dance, translation theory is approached. In 3.2 the consideration of dynamic and functional models in translation as identified by Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber (1964 and 1969) inform the progressive orientation of this research towards making AD a more enterprising tool.

### **3.2 Into Overdrive - Towards a dynamic equivalence**

In this section, I consider AD in relation to some dynamic and functional models in translation theories before returning to my practice with new insights. The experts acknowledge the need for the active interpretive role of the listener but AD is inevitably concerned to describe far less than is seen or is possible to see as Snyder (1995) and Pfanstiel (1995) acknowledge but fail to satisfactorily resolve. A translation of a visual artwork into an oral commentary runs the risk of flattening or discrediting the work to such an extent that it becomes bland: devoid of texture or suggestion. This conflict between the prescriptive and monocentric lens of the formal description

(translation) and the aim of liberating non-seeing spectators to interpret freely renders conventional AD as restrictive, unreliable and unrealistic. Raina Haig, in her essay '*The Construction of Meaning in Audiodescription*,' (2005:9), calls for an admission that conventional AD is;

...subjective, culturally defined and constructed, and unstable. Once admitted, the differences in interpretation between different subjectivities, necessitates detailed study of the text object's cultural codes, in order to arrive at a preferred meaning. Otherwise the AS (audio-describing subject) is, in these terms, providing subjectivity dressed up as objectivity, and thereby engaged in disarticulating over eighty years of critical thinking.

She also cites Rodowick (1990:9) as follows:

...the idea of communication as a linear channel between two points—the linking of addresser and addressee through a reciprocally comprehensible message--has ceased to be valid. "Discourse" is no longer linear and reversible; it is becoming increasingly entropic. Similarly, distinctions between subject and object are no longer clear-cut.

Considering the ambiguities around narrative and role that are often present in contemporary dance, Haig's comments take on a distinct relevance for AD and dance. The phenomena that accompany the act of translating words into other languages; such as unintentional or intentional mismatches, struggles and resistances that occur in any interpretation, can shed light on the process of editing, or curating that an audio describer undertakes.

As the translation theorist and critic Laurence Venuti (2000:468) points out, translation is, '...never trouble free or untroubled because it must negotiate the cultural and linguistic complexities that exist between receivers and modes' and it necessitates a choice of 'certain domestic discourses over others' (ibid:469). These socially constructed hierarchies are inherent in translation processes and must be recognised and negotiated. Mikhail Bakhtin noted in the mid-twentieth century that, 'Language is not abstract grammatical categories, but is ideologically saturated' (Burke & Crowley 2000:269). These robust socially constructed stratifications inherent in translation processes have parallels with AD's structures and by extension, dance from visual to verbal.

Post-structural analysis of translation is concerned more with functional understanding of the subject text or to use Nida and Taber's (1969) terminology, a 'dynamic equivalence'. Nida (1964) identifies two types of equivalence, 'formal' and 'dynamic'. Formal equivalence is concerned with accuracy and fidelity to the subject text and 'focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content'. In terms of AD for dance this could reflect the objective, more mechanical intentions. 'Dynamic equivalence' is based upon 'the principle of equivalent effect' (ibid:159). This dynamic equivalence, or functional translation, seeks to replicate an equivalent effect on its target audience and is concerned with how it is connected to receivers. Dynamic equivalence advocates a hermeneutic approach. Specifically, it can shift according to cultural and social situations and the creative values of the subject text and target audience.

I return to the studio with a new frame for describing and two new approaches to test. With me in the studio are the Alston Company and seven other volunteer describers.<sup>36</sup> We watch a duet section of *Overdrive* (2003) danced live by two company dancers. We listen to each other describing what we see in response to a set of abridged agreed guidelines for AD. They are:

- Avoid technical or stage terminology
- Include information about placement and direction in the space
- Describe actions rather than intentions

We decide that it would be acceptable to include ballet vocabulary in line with Scottish Ballet's practice in the view that terms such as arabesque and pirouette are considered to be understood widely by a general public.<sup>37</sup> The immediate issue we face is the speed at which the dancers are moving. It is impossible to describe their movements in detail and the only movements being fully described are those that happen at a slower pace, which seems rather arbitrary and unbalanced. We all struggle to speak quickly enough to keep up with the dance and we discuss possible ways to address this. A description of this dance has to attempt to embody and

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<sup>36</sup> studio research as part of Dartington Arts residency 2011

<sup>37</sup> Interview Tamsin Bone (2011), Education Officer, Scottish Ballet



capture the assertive thrusts, darts and slides of performers into the present. The words must exist in the same moments as the action or they will always be catching up: chasing what has already passed, a member of a relay team with nothing to pass on. As they say, post-anecdote, 'you had to be there'.

One solution is to describe using fragments of sentences, single words and qualitative expressions when the choreography is moving at speed. This method frees us to capture much more in a shorter space of time and reflects the developing 'feel' of the duet more effectively. We also experiment with how much metaphor and overtly interpretive language to use. Each group of three lines of text below is one moment of six, described by three voices.

*A woman lifts her arm, curved in front of her  
She hides behind her arm then catches our eyes  
Frightened, she does not want to be seen*

*The woman threads her other arm through, straight on the diagonal  
She peeps beneath a shielding upper arm  
Her own body as shield, she casts a suspicious glance*

*Her head swings to the left, then right  
In abandon she flings from side to side  
She angrily throws herself around, out of control*

*A man and a woman meet in the centre of the space. Same height.  
Smooth walk. They are familiar with each other and make easy contact  
They know each other, are pleased to see each other*

*Hold hands, shoulders, lean on backs, legs high and swift turns together  
Equal sharing of weight, fluid, balance with ease  
They trust each other: they go back a long way*

*They split apart, far away, turns, feet flip, arms and legs extend and bodies upright  
Fast leg scissors, slicing limbs  
Knight in shining armour, he's a rescuer, ole'*

Smith studio (2011)

This snippet of studio research above, on reflection, became a metaphor for the process of dynamic translation in action. Nida and Taber (1969) identify that there are not always formal equivalents between languages but that the target text should represent the closest equivalent of a subject text word. These words, above, spoken concurrently, are an attempt to represent some of the many phenomena co-existing in each moment. The task also brought into focus an attempt to try and communicate how bodies are moving not just where they are moving and to do it at speed indicating the importance of the temporal as well as qualitative dynamic rhythms.

Reflecting back to my solo, *A Woman Walks*, I am reminded of the parched sparseness of the first description and despite its accuracy in the context of a formal equivalence, how lacking it was, in a feel for the way I was performing the movements. Venuti has suggested that a formal equivalent approach can increase the 'foreignness of the text' (2000:269) which serves to distance the target audience from the feel or intention of the text. I questioned my attempts at distanced objectivity and whether they were masking or hiding the choreography further rather than revealing it.

The use of formal or direct equivalents, however, might at times have serious and misleading implications, since the translation may not be understood easily by the target audience (Fawcett, 1997). Nida and Taber (1969:201) acknowledge that,

Typically, formal correspondence distorts the grammatical and stylistic patterns of the receptor language, and hence distorts the message, so as to cause the receptor to misunderstand or to labor unduly hard

Dynamic equivalence may offer a more satisfactory model as a principle that seeks to translate the meaning of the original text in such a way that it will elicit the same effect on the audience as the original wording did upon the audience of the subject text. Nida and Taber (1969:25) state, 'dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information'. This is useful to my research as it offers a frame for containing descriptions that might more broadly explore a range of simultaneous, conflicting or complementary perspectives. This is explored further in Chapter 4 Described Dances - Inside Out, page 66.

Considering translation helps to take account of the challenges that AD presents and maybe begin to reconcile them. In a relatively short space of time as a group we had found the need and a basic method for balancing function and feel without relying on storytelling or obvious personal readings. The dancing body is not mundane, codified or pedestrian nor does it have a particularly useful agreed set of terminologies for my choreographic vocabulary, rendering ideas around translation complex. To sum up: my research on AD guidelines and translation points towards the conclusion that it is arguably impossible to achieve impartial verbal description while capturing the complex qualities of live dance performance.

### 3.3 Missing

As I got to know more about AD and explored it in depth within my own work, the treatment of ambiguity continued to present the most dynamic challenges. Gecko Theatre Company's work would present especially complex challenges for description. I listened to the professional audio description of Gecko's *Missing* (2012). *Missing* is described by the company as,

a deliciously warped journey into the depths of the human psyche. Follow Lily, a woman whose soul appears to be decaying. She is very successful in life and love but something is missing...

This production is a complex web of narratives in multiple languages, across overlapping timelines, told by many voices. Its ideas and meanings are deliberately disjointed and ambiguous and have been described as dreamlike, intense and personal, 'A kind of restless delirium, dense with poetic effect.' Sanjoy Roy, Guardian (2012)

The production begins with a female character being visited by a little girl. The girl is a puppet. The description begins, 'The woman sees her daughter appear at the back of the room.' As the piece goes on, other characters are assigned roles by the describer where they were not presented as such to the general audience, 'the radiologist carried the results across the room'. I became confused as to the mismatch between the evolving fragmented narratives presented on stage and the additional information I was receiving via the AD.

During interview with Amit Lahav, Artistic Director of Gecko, he explained that he had been interviewed by the audio describer and had answered her questions relating to possible relationships and roles of and between the characters.<sup>38</sup> It seems that the describer, once satisfied with a more logical explanation of events and narrative, had not only described what was unfolding but what she thought it meant so as to ease the ambiguity or relieve the anticipated or assumed confusion. The nature of the production, however was to stimulate witnesses to consider, 'how far they have strayed from who they are and where they come from' (Gecko).<sup>39</sup> This fundamental premise of the work is itself ambiguous and reliant on evoking diverse subjective interpretations.

The decision of the audio-describer in this instance undermines the artistic integrity of the company's work but serves as a useful reminder of the potential for distraction from 'essence' or artistic intention through an attempt to be loyal or true to the 'rules' of AD. In this case the betrayal was to the artwork, director and audience and highlighted the power dynamic present in the relationship between AD and the work.<sup>40</sup> This instance is an example of AD framed within the medical model of disability: taking on an authority in order to 'help' visually impaired people understand the work.

The loss of ambiguity I experienced as I listened to the AD during the performance of *Missing* highlighted for me Appiah's (1993) notion of what 'matters' in a performance and what 'matters' to audiences. The artistic essence in *Missing* (2012) could not be accounted for by the approach to AD at the Theatre Royal. Balancing ideas of ambiguity, relationships and functional oppositions offers useful insights for a different kind of voiced choreography. This affects my studio practice by prompting different types of tasks relating to decision-making, uncertainty and myriad possibilities building on the simultaneous descriptions of *Overdrive* (2003).

As this chapter illustrates, my exploration of theoretical linguistic oppositions emerged

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Amit Lahav, (Plymouth 2012)

<sup>39</sup> From the company's own promotional material [www.geckothetre.com](http://www.geckothetre.com)

<sup>40</sup> In Italian the expression 'traduttore traditor' means 'the translator is a betrayer'. The Italian expression is two words which sound almost the same indicating the potential for misleading.

out of, and in tandem with, practical tensions and problems in the application of description in my studio practice. Treating specific examples of AD in dance practice as a type of cultural translation from visual image to speech helped me to analyse the relationship between describer and listener in my work. In other words, theories for translating between languages illustrate various ways of organising different layers and textures such as those whose presence becomes clear through my efforts to describe my own and others' work.

### 3.4 Thicker Description

The ethicist and philosopher Anthony Appiah's (1992) model for cross-cultural engagement explored in his *Thick Translation* (1993) offers a useful parallel for an expanded model of AD and the potential power relations between translator and receiver. *Overdrive* (Alston 2003) proved difficult to describe because of its speed. *A Woman Walks* (2009) demanded overlapping descriptions that spanned mechanics and poetics. A thicker kind of description enables the concurrent presence of different kinds of commentary.

In *A Woman Walks*, the culminating sound of the final version of the solo dance was a layering of the functional, qualitative, metaphorical and narrative texts. The words and the ways in which they were spoken and recorded afforded a 'thicker' consistency to the descriptions and became a distinctive feature of the work. When I shared this piece of work with the group of audio describers at The Theatre Royal in Plymouth (2011) it was criticised as 'unclear' and 'difficult to understand'. The need for separation of the description from the artwork as a fundamental principle of AD elicited this negative response. On reflection, I wondered whether the describers might have found the solo without the description any easier to understand.

Providing thicker, multi modal layers of information and context is a rich proposition for dance and one that responds to criticism of the singular commentary. The particular challenges for AD in contemporary dance performance include: language being processed differently than visual image by the brain, inability to respond to the multi-presence of images and information (RNIB), words being constructed into sentences in a linear, time-based structure, dance being often abstract with a lack of

narrative landmarks, lead toward the 'thicker description' with optimism.<sup>41</sup> The intersubjectivity demanded by work that defines its own boundaries, like Gecko for example, complicates attempts at non-interpretive commentary but could be accommodated by multi-layered texts.

Like Gecko, StopGAP Dance Company (May 2011) was more enthusiastic about a multi-layered or 'thicker' descriptive approach (as outlined in the introduction). In interview with then Artistic Director, Vicki Balaam (2013), we discussed the potential benefits of an entire documentary package being produced for their touring work, *Tresspass* (2011) including background notes, choreographer's intention and influences, descriptions of movement patterns, qualities and characters.<sup>42</sup> This would afford the listener or witness the capacity to reconstruct the work, in order to make sense of it themselves. This marks a shift towards listener/witness interpretation and away from a prescribed view.

Appiah's model applied to dance AD could allow a listener to gain understandings of the complexities of the visual information present and offer routes towards the central 'literary' or artistic qualities of the work by offering a range of kinds of information. Importantly it gives the listener the ability to navigate through the layers of meanings to find an individual interpretation. The proposition for my research was that that by offering many different voices or aspects of the work, the witness would have the opportunity to interpret the work according to a self-directed process of reconstruction. This model was described during my research on *A Woman Walks* by Hibbert (2010) as being a way of allowing her to feel as if she was 'owning the process of interpreting...I can sift through the work and form an idea of its character without feeling boxed in'.

In contrast to the objective aspiration of Vocaleyes and the American Council for the Blind, this 'thicker' approach to AD with its layers of subjectivities, observations and information, could offer more potential for empowering witnesses to navigate and construct the work according to their own interpretation.

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<sup>41</sup> [www.mib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss](http://www.mib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss) accessed July 2010

<sup>42</sup> StopGAP performed *Tresspass* at Dartington Arts (2013)

Venuti cites Borges (1999:45), 'It is the translator's infidelity, happy and creative, that must matter most.' The power and poetic influence of the describer gained prominence in the research in the light of the translator's potential role: as something creative; instrumental in enhancing the general experience; operating as one of the artistic facets of the work; and one of many complex layers of kinaesthetic and sensory information.

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### **3.5 Translating back to the body**

Taking the idea that a thicker approach to description might offer a striation of parallel but unique perspectives concurrently, I begin to experiment with this in the studio. When creating *A Woman Walks* (2009), I had made a solo choreography from my own description, danced it and recorded it. It was only when reflecting on and analysing the process of making that I realised how overlapped the process of dancing, writing and describing had been. These intertwinings of different manifestations of the solo were explored back in the studio with two dancers, Rosie and Clare, *A Woman Walks* (2012). The three different texts I had produced were used as source material for new choreographies embodied by the dancers. I wondered whether a translation of the texts back to the body might offer something new to the research. This development is demonstrated in FILM 1.

I give Clare and Rosie three descriptions from *A Woman Walks* (2009): one mechanical stage directions, one a mix of metaphor and imagery and one narrative that includes very little body in space information. They listen over and over on headphones, their task to create this dance. I begin to see patches of the different strands of texts appear and disappear as the dancers explore their interpretations and embody the descriptions. As I watch them listen, tracing directions and movements in space I am struck by the way they move. The quality of stop-start, tested but unfinished movements, a thinking and moving in the moment which holds me: unpredictable, uncertain. The dancers settle on a version of the text dance and they show me together. Their paths cross, there are shared moments linked in their intention or in their direction or action in space – or both. They perform their dance with concentrated focus: as if still listening. I am interested in how the dances seem linked

despite their separateness.

The different imaginative responses of the dancers were elicited by the same texts. As I watched these two dances I was witnessing more than movement material. They were entwined but separate, existing in the same moment in different imaginative spaces: each interpretation a complex intertwining of types of perception and consciousness. The dance's structural simplicity started to reveal the intertwining layers of performer interpretation, action and narrative.

A week into this process, we had developed a short piece of choreography from the piece of shared text. The movement material included looks, intentions and presences that coloured the material to provide some shared qualities and there was a balance of difference in their performances, bodies and interpretations to lend a satisfying ambiguity: an attempt to 'describe' the uncertainty of a shared understanding of the text. I observed how the dancers embodied an ambiguity that echoed back and forth between them.

I knew that as the dancers became familiar with the material, it would start to lose its finely balanced nuance. It was difficult to maintain the particular textures in material and to resist the body's attempts to smooth off the edges. I set them a task. The next time they danced it through, at a certain point they were to swap roles and dance the other's dance. They said they could not do it: they did not know the material. I asked them to dance what they thought the other had been doing. The result surprised me. It was fascinating to watch. The feeling of liveness, of presentness and openness was still there but it was joined by an almost indescribable quality of not-belonging. Rosie and Claire carried out the movements they thought the other had been doing with some confidence but it was punctuated by sudden stillnesses, by small inclined looks over the shoulder as if trying to will the material into their bodies by osmosis, by a lightness in the action which revealed an uncertainty: as if the movement did not quite fit.

As the dance developed and exposed different layers of confidence, uncertainty, suggestion and ambiguity the dancers tried out and searched for the other's dance.



They edged into an unfamiliar territory, or rather, another's footsteps. This tentative reaching out into or sensing of the other's place in the same world described or sketched out possible connections between them: the reversibility of the phenomenological act of touching and being touched. This intercorporeality, its relation from body to body was tangible in their shared intention and uncertainty.

During explorations of *A Woman Walks* (2012), I watched Rosie and Clare try on the other's dance; they knew it existed in its fullness somewhere else. We were all detached but connected, dancing and observing, displaced like the dances from the listened to texts, and trying on the phrases like someone else's clothes. The enquiry was to investigate the translation or transposition of the different listened to texts back to the body: the intertwinings of different manifestations of the solo. This process could be considered as an instance of non-verbal thick description, or thick 'inscription'. The structural simplicity provided a frame for revealing the intertwining layers of performer interpretation, action and narrative. This is further developed in Chapter 4 Described Dances – Inside Out as I analyse, *Floating the Tongue* (1973) page 75.

### **3.6 One Man Band**

On reflection of some of the challenges emerging out of AD, I propose that the current model of AD for dance reflects the hegemonised medical model of disability and that formal AD is problematic and reductive. The mechanistic device of AD could be thought of as both an unwelcome distraction in the artwork and a potentially patronising compromise rather than a genuine tool for inclusion. My studio practice explores this outcome with practice that foregrounds the intervention over and above any meaning or intention in the choreography. In *One Man Band* (2011), bells and other noisy attachments were fixed to body parts as a guide to what was moving and where. Rattles and percussive instruments and fabrics were taped by Clare onto Rosie's ankles, wrists, back and head with masking tape. Rosie becomes increasingly percussive as she moves.

This experiment is deliberately blunt and my intention is to explore the lack of nuance and sensitivity in the intervention. The dance was filmed: attaching more and more

instruments and noisy objects on to Rosie's body building a crescendo of movement sounds. Attempting this task, I found that as much as movement triggered the sounds, through a crossover of motivations, the sounds informed or at times invented the movement: an echo perhaps of the influence of AD on constructing experience. Exploring the shortcomings of thinking about individual movements or body parts as distinctive sounds did not lead to a dead end, in fact it triggered the following new work.

While reviewing the footage of *One Man Band* (2012) and focusing on the sound I decided to apply an idea from Alvin Lucier's acoustic phenomena, '*I am Sitting in a Room*' (1970). Lucier made a recording of his voice, which he then re-recorded multiple times until it became morphed by resonances and the process of recording. Each successive recording gathers additional acoustic layers of the performance space allowing the imprint of the space to be conveyed in a way that is normally unavailable to the listener. The piece is its transformation. I was interested in how applying his recording/re-recording method to a filmed dance might initiate new textures of choreographic screen and audio material. I take a short section of the noise-making experiment on video and film the clip on screen to see how this intervention could represent the dance and initiate new textures of choreographic screen and audio material.

I film the footage as I see it on my computer, including the playback tools and freeze frames of iMovie then repeat this process many times. Already on the first filming of the clip, the screen becomes opaque and the dancers move behind a mist. There is a faint reflection of me in the screen and the camera filming is clearly visible. There begin to be visible layers on the screen, which create a depth to the footage including my reflection, the misty dancers and their shadows on the back wall. The edge of my computer screen is clearly visible showing my desk and reference to my real-time, non-performative present. The row of still images at the bottom of the screen remind me that this is a post-performance intervention. It literally foregrounds the intervention.

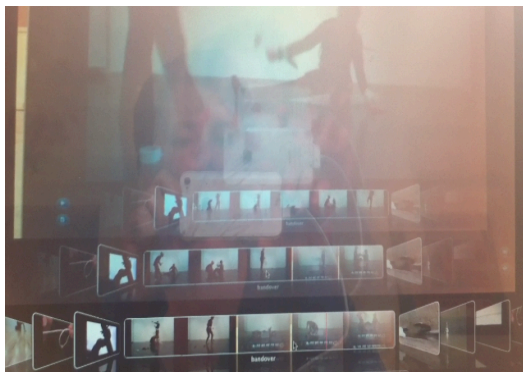


Image 4

The red line measures time as it counts along the seconds at the base of the screen. With each repeat, the mist thickens. The sound, in contrast, seems to get louder, tinnier, more echoed. The dancers seem to be moving underwater and their bodies judder and almost flicker like an old movie.

The dancers almost disappear as the instruments of this intervention gain prominence in the frame. Each line of still images gains prominence as they creep up the screen and the still of a different dancer from a different project on the far left of screen becomes an obvious visual reference point. The sound continues to distort, becoming more industrial, echoing and clanking. There are still recognisable sounds and having seen previously how they are made, it is possible to still imagine or remember that they are also a movement. The sound separates from the movement as the bodies disappear. The contact of hands, leg, back on the floor scrape abrasively and a beep-beep of my washing machine in the background intermingles with the score.

The dancers themselves become shadows as my reflected presence gets stronger with each filming and each new repeated image. I, as the intervener become clearer and more defined as the dance gets fuzzier and disappears. On my screen, I see my eyes look up and return to the lens of the camera. With each repeat I adjust the volume control which appears as a white popping line left to right on screen: a reminder of my attempts to discern the sound as it distorts.

The bodies, now only shadows, have lost their weight. They float and are detached from their sounds, their relationship with the world. The visual relationship between source and sound disappears but the sounds still elicit the visual image. As the source disappears and becomes harder to grasp with each re-filming, the presence of the person filming, the intervener, the interpreter becomes clearer and more defined.

The metaphor is clear: the dance disappears and the intervention comes more into focus. The dance almost entirely disappears as the layers of this intervention gain prominence in the frame prompting me to understand the way an artwork can begin

to disappear behind a dominating presence of a describer: how a describing voice could become foregrounded at the cost of the work's identity. This metaphor also points toward the possibility of exploring and exploiting the role of the describing voice as a force of narrative, influence or identity.

*One Man Band* exaggerates the authority of the describer and is a reminder of how sight is privileged in choreography in general terms and that AD can potentially inhibit the potential for diverse readings of a choreography. *One Man Band* includes new textures of choreography on screen and audio materials. I am motivated to explore a more integrated approach to describing and interpreting a work: one that demands a more active participation from all witnesses and which disregards the hegemony of help. The search for a variety of sensory invitations could offer rich choreographic potential emerging not dependent on any prescribed mode of sensory attention.

The challenge of accommodating ambiguity and a lack of narrative landmarks in a verbal description, emerges alongside the translation research. The performative potential of ambiguity embedded within my own choreographies presents challenges for AD. By experiencing multiple possible interpretations in practice and by attempting to capture in a few words the complex, bombardment of images, assumptions and responses, questions of the competence of language were raised. This prompted me to question what aspects of the choreography might be effectively expressed in some other, non-verbal way.

Applying and testing AD opens up many more questions than it resolves. There are important differences in how spoken language and sight operate and questions of individual interpretation and relationships between witnesses and performers run the risk of being underplayed or ignored when attempting to follow the guidelines for AD. AD's restrictions and contradictions pose testing challenges for how spoken language and dance co-habit within its role as sight service for the visually impaired. I begin to consider how spoken texts and descriptions might embrace these challenges and provide new textures in performance for all witnesses.

The challenge of accommodating ambiguity and a lack of narrative landmarks in a verbal description, emerges alongside the translation research. The performative potential of ambiguity embedded within my own choreographies presents challenges for AD. By experiencing multiple possible interpretations in practice and by attempting to capture in a few words the complex, bombardment of images, assumptions and responses, questions of the competence of language were raised. This prompted me to question what aspects of the choreography might be effectively expressed in some other, non-verbal way.

## Chapter 4 Described Dances –Inside Out [[FILM 2](#)]

[Film 2 includes *Into Knots*: studio experiments with string from initial film/sound experiment through to performance.]

In Described Dances - Inside Out, I explore the describing voice of the performer – doing and speaking - alongside a more interpretative approach to description. I refer to my studio collaborations with; Roseanna Anderson Lex Hibbert, Clare Parker and Juliet Robson. I apply a loosening of AD rules to explore the more interpretative subjective voices emerging from descriptions given by the performers themselves. I begin to consider how spoken texts and descriptions in performance might enhance and provide new textures for all witnesses.

This section leads into exploring presence, absence and intersubjectivity informed by Merleau-Ponty and Serres' approaches to perception. New possibilities for revealing hidden textures of a piece are investigated and some of the complexities of speaking 'seen' movements are reoriented to enrich new choreographic processes for new work. I introduce *Into Knots* (2011-14). This work provokes attention to the complexities of occupying both object and subject roles in the process of describing. Examples of other works that explore the voice of the performer (Richard Bull 1976, Bill T Jones 1979) are analysed with the intention of illuminating this challenge and activating new choreographic method. The nature of the practice analysed in this section marks a return to questions of ambiguity and meaning introduced in Described Dances - Outside In.

### 4.1 Into Knots

Here I investigate aspects of intersubjectivity as a challenge for performers, witnesses and AD by setting the challenge of describing a functional everyday activity (in this case tying a knot in a piece of string). I consider how Merleau-Ponty and Serres' approaches to perception inform this studio research. The challenge of accommodating ambiguity and a lack of narrative landmarks in a verbal description, emerges alongside the translation research.

As I introduced in 3.2 page 51, I researched modes of description with seven other describers. During one of the dance phrases, listening to my own voice I realised that my words were tightly bound in my experiences as a dancer. I saw the dancers' movements and I remembered how they felt, as toes stroked up the calf I recalled the occasional static of shoe on tights and as heads whipped I felt the satisfaction of a spin well turned. I experienced how my movement memories and empathies were at play when I watch someone move. I was experiencing a form of kinaesthetic exchange with the dancers. As John Martin (1936:117) suggests,

When we see a human body moving, we see movement which is potentially produced by any human body and therefore by our own . . . through kinesthetic sympathy we actually reproduce it vicariously in our present muscular experience and awaken such associational connotations as might have been ours if the original movement had been of our own making.

At this point the argument requires a brief excursion into the territory of theoretical phenomenology, beginning with the work of Merleau-Ponty whose work on intersubjectivity identifies the bodily or fleshy reciprocity of perceptive process. For Merleau-Ponty (1962:xii and 346-365) an intersubjective experience is 'An embodied experience that involves the mutual perception of another person' so that,

Perceiving another involves the act of reflecting back onto the self but also seeing oneself reflected in another. This double-act of reflection is in a constant state of flux. (1962:52-63);

As I described the two dancers, I found myself eliciting unexpected memories and associations and on playing back the recordings, I recognised a particularly wandering subjectivity in my commentary. I was prompted to re-evaluate my own describing with a more integrated understanding of how I perceive the body. Understanding my own perception would aid explorations of potential new relationships for performance that take into account the associative and individual responses of witnesses.

In direct response to the phenomenological framing of the shifting subject/object presences at play when dancing/doing and watching as introduced in Chapter 2 Context Review, I begin to disrupt the relationship with the absent or invisible body that disappears during mundane or automatic movements. In the studio, with my collaborator Juliet Robson, I focus on awareness of the touching surfaces of the skin: describing almost simultaneously the sensations of both surfaces. We explore how to objectively describe a familiar movement while also performing it: the aim of this task

being to investigate and embody the simultaneous roles of watched and watcher: performer and witness.

Juliet films her hands tying knots in string and concurrently describes what she is doing. The film itself is a close up of Juliet's hands. Pale skin, white nail ends against the black of her clothing. The hands come in and out of focus as they move in and away from the camera: the striking metaphor of threads of clarity coming in and out of focus. The commentary, performed as Juliet (both subject and object) watches her hands, is not fluid. She stumbles, stop-starts and the attempt to give a close description of the action has a particularly engaging quality.

In this peculiar 'liveness', Juliet embodies the self-awareness of an unfamiliar attention on an action more usually experienced as absent and tries to objectify what she sees. There is a kind of unfamiliar distancing in her voice as she attempts to dislocate the action from its usual role of automatic. She watches her hands threading, looping, pulling and crossing. She tries to separate herself from her body to describe 'at a distance'.



Juliet shuttles between her seen and felt selves. The attempt to separate speech from the body and the fleshy means of its utterances reveals a textured performance that quivers in the moments of displacement or fluctuation. Following Serres, my studio research begins to explore how we cannot cleave embodiment from language or one sense from another. This is a distinct departure from *A Woman Walks* (2009) where I persist with an attempt to describe objectively.

My next move is to take the audio from the string task video and separate it from the image so I can experience it non-visually. I 'detached audio' (the command on Macbook), which already is so detached from its action and I listen to it on my iPod. I hear it differently, by earpiece. The 'liveness' I was drawn to is exaggerated now it is spoken directly into my head. It is full of movement imagery and the words describing the actions of the hands and the shapes made by the string suggest a score for an improvised whole body choreography. I trace the actions in my body. A shoulder



'loops and pulls through', a knee then a foot 'circle and close behind'. The words suggest a score for whole body movement and the way in which Juliet's voice hovers in the present, coming and going like the oscillating focus of the film invites an intense concentration from the listener. I give the voice recordings to Rosie and Clare in the studio to observe how might they respond to this text by translating or inhabiting these words.

Rosie and Clare listen to the knot recording through headphones. They trace movements with their bodies. I watch them listening intently through their headphones. I am drawn to the 'way' that they are listening as they dance and the 'way' that I am watching them. Their entire bodies seem to be listening: attentive. The liveness I was drawn to in Juliet's description is reflected here in the quality of the dancers' movements. Their attention on following the words and translating them into their bodies calls for a particular mode of focus and of moving: a shared intricacy in the rhythms they hear. Rosie speaks about feeling her senses 'blurring', that she is 'feeling her way' through it. My response is an active, multi-sensory attention,

*Watching the dancers I feel much more than I am seeing. I lean forward slightly,  
lengthen my spine as if to hear what they hear. My body reaches out to theirs.  
Sitting here in front of the dancers I am engaging on much more than a visual level.  
My body feels open, receptive. At times I clearly see, or think I see, the movements  
of thinking, of decision making. The fingers wriggling while the rest of the body  
freezes mid crouch, a head inclines, eyes closed for a moment, the flow of a turn is  
suddenly interrupted.*

Smith studio notes (2012)

The way the dancers follow the spoken descriptions of knotting string reveals a sort of surrender to instruction: expressing a kind of alive emptiness. Distinct efforts in the process of translation from object string to object body paint an eerie detachment onto a process of not becoming. The state of being open to instruction, taking guidance from an external source or commentary and transposing this to the body, necessitates an oscillation between embodied and absent presences. Rosie and Clare try on the words but they do not become them. They are separate to their actions but at the same time they embody them through their deliberate 'dancerly' explorations.

I reflect on the distancing and dislocation of Juliet's voice from her actions as she tries to describe her hands. In and out of her body: an impossible separation that hovers in space. The dislocation I feel while observing dancers' knot-tying task is also akin to the loss of gravity or a lack of weight or familiar/expected fall in the limbs: a searching, as watcher, for an explanation or an anchor, for a familiar orientation for reassurance. This resonates with the weightless drift of *One Man Band*. In this task I am exploring Rosie and Clare's translation of Juliet's description to their bodies. The effort of the task produces ways of moving that, like Juliet, also seem unsettled.

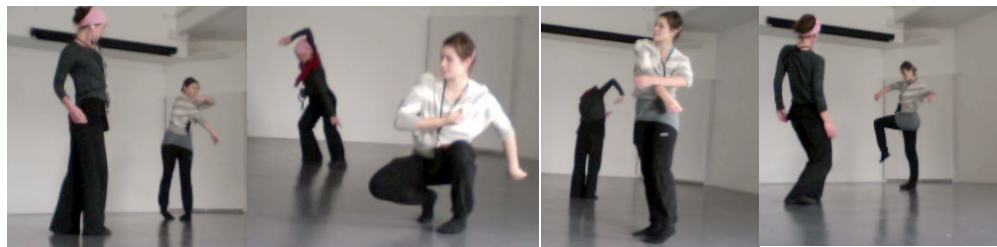


Image 6

I back away a little from the discomfort of this ambiguity but this is a very active engagement that reminds me of the attentive state in which I read Serres' (2008:17,259,314) passages on the intense physicality of the burning boat, of jumping, of the hunt. This is not a fixed choreography, it is a state of moving. Its steps are circumstantial, idiosyncratic, unpredictable and sometimes awkward but they are segmental: part of a whole. That is the main point.

So I arrive at the goal of my aim in this section of the research. These exercises and reflections have been carried out and are reported here because they converge upon a single central objective. Specifically, my aim in this studio research has been to investigate how specific choreographic tasks can evoke experiences between witness and performer that bring attention to an integrated sensory process. For example, the string tasks were explicit and systematic experiments that explored engagements with speaking absent and present bodies, shifting modes of describing voices and the translation or transposition into whole body movement responses.

Through this research a distinctive and highly evocative choreography has been emerging. By tracking and developing steady progressions from filmed audio task to

my own improvisations, and then watching other dancers explore the line of enquiry, a methodological structure was acquiring form. Personal descriptions or commentaries of movements and experiences, including the real time uncertainties of memory and decision-making, were being translated, or transposed onto one's own body.

I reflect on the stimuli I had given the dancers. The oscillating video images of Juliet's hands, the sound of her voice quavering, the movement words in the text. I also considered the way in which they were listening, the voice detached from its source, almost whispered into their heads.

Very importantly, they were dancing this dance in the present and it could only exist in this present. It could not be learnt or replicated or performed without its sound. It embodied Michel Serres' image of the senses as a knotting together of stimuli. The wrapping around on themselves, no end and no beginning, a knotting and an unknotting where surfaces slide by one another sometimes pulling tight together to form a shaped knot, sometimes slipping through and undoing. The string experiments begin to wind together strands of the research: description, a more integrated understanding of sensory perception and explorations of subjective experience as a distinctive element in the identity of a choreography.

At this point it is vital to put Merleau-Ponty in context. To anticipate, he focuses on vision but I am working towards a more integrated sensory approach. That said, Merleau-Ponty's contribution is immense. He challenges ideas of the body as a material object and his work marks a paradigm shift in the role of the body in the constitution of perception and experience. He rejects the notion that thinking takes place from a vantage point outside of bodily presence, rather that it was emplaced in 'the actual body I call mine' (1964:160): that sight and movement are valid modes of entering into intersensory relationships with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the body grounds and makes possible, yet remains peripheral in the boundaries of our perceptual awareness, 'my body is constantly perceived' yet 'it remains marginal to my perceptions' (1942:90). His embedding of perception in the body grounds a sense of self through a tactility that, 'adheres us to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us; and it never quite becomes an object. It is not I who touch, it is my body'.

Serres' *The Five Senses* (1985) helps me challenge the idea of the senses as five distinct experiences, as five ways in to the mind/body where sight is the verifier of knowledge, 'I saw it with my own eyes', 'Seeing is believing'. As I explore ways to approach what I see, to describe dancing bodies in words that attempt to translate the visual into verbal, I cannot ignore the jenga tower of sensory engagements, which draw me further from a translation. My experiences shift and teeter, a complex mediation of criss-crossing sensations incorporating memory, association and imagination as passive components of consciousness.

Serres wants to enjoy his senses, 'to run free' and to experience this enjoyment 'at leisure' (1995:71), but he chooses to write this experience in the very medium that tethers them. I ask myself whether the way Serres takes on this challenge can help me to ask my questions of describing dance, of whether my own impossible task can itself elicit new meshed, or mingled works that uncover new choreographies which incorporate texts in ways that might illuminate the work without flattening or creating its own 'dead zone' (Connor 1999).

While Serres acknowledges and embraces the rigid confines of language, his ideas about the meshing and mingling of bodies and the feel of the 'soul' in movement not in stillness and observation, offer a frame for speaking or writing an observed dance that acknowledges the knowledge embodied in all the senses.

Serres writes as he thinks, unbounded by the delineation of territories. He does not use one metalanguage but many, and he does not substitute his commentary for what he is commenting on. Instead of mobilizing the referent inside the text as scholarly works do - by foot-notes, descriptions, pictures, diagrams, instrumentation, allusions- Serres inserts his texts as a legend for us to read our world .  
Latour (1987:83-92)

Serres' accounts of the vestibular, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic (although he doesn't use this word) aspects of sensory perception and his references to memory, fragments of half-remembered stories, unaccounted for quotes and a meandering journey through the meshy, fleshy fabric of imagination offer me a challenging proposition for how I might reapproach spoken texts as part of dance performance. I am intrigued by how he captures so many threads of thought in his texts.

Serres (2008:11) describes language as numbing, anaesthetising. Language and knowledge are treated as drugs, 'Language dictates. We are addicted' (ibid:92): 'language is 'the hard- est of hard drugs' (ibid:59). He tells a story of being stung by a wasp during a lecture and carrying on talking as though nothing had happened (2008:59) His mouth emptied of taste, speech made him into a statue, unfeeling.

This resonates with my findings, through the integration of practice and theory, about formal translations detracting from the non-visual presences in performance by 'increasing the foreignness of the text'. A spoken commentary could actually detract from the experience of performance for non-sighted audiences and render the other sensory mechanisms less effective. This prompts consideration for how spoken texts, even if they are multi-layered, might be woven into dance performance without dissolving or misting other layers of perceptive experience. I consider examples of work by Richard Bull, *The Dance that Describes Itself* (1976) and Bill T Jones, *Floating the Tongue* (1979) wherein the performer voices are key elements of the work.

#### **4.2 Dances that Describe Themselves**

I consider here how *Dances that Describe Themselves* (1976) by Richard Bull and *Floating the Tongue* (1979) by Bill T Jones, can reveal aspects of the performers' identities and highlight or direct attention to presences usually unavailable to witnesses. In 2013 I rehearse my own version of *Floating the Tongue* in order to explore how revealing a range of spoken presences of dance performers might provide new choreographic textures.

Richard Bull's work, *The Dance that Describes Itself* (1973) and Susan Foster's (2002) examination of that work in *Dances that Describe Themselves*, offers a model for interweaving the subjectivities of the dancing experience with the objective shapes and journeys of the 'dance' as a separate entity. The work was developed alongside the new subject area of Kinesiology Studies at Brockport University department, New York. *The Dance that Describes Itself* was a performative manifestation of the deconstruction and exploration of dance as a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the dancers' embodiment of it. The work exposed the intellectual and physical

shuttling that comprised the act of performing dance. This key piece of work also relates to Cooper Albright's rewriting of dance as an embodied experience (1997, 2003).

*The Dance that Describes Itself* was an improvised work structured around complex and sophisticated scores that involved an individual text spoken by each performer. The performance centred on the idea that the dance had a life and identity of its own, outside of and separate to the performers. The performers had a relationship with each other, the dance and their own experience of the dance.

The dancers, bossed about, seemingly independent, following, and this dance makes it clear that the dancers are following instructions. But instructions can be understood individually, and performers have a way of bringing themselves to the occasion. The dance will describe the movements of the dancers; dancers will describe and comment on their own movement; dancers will defy the dance, obey it, embody it'  
(Foster 2002:8)

Richard Bull wanted to 'claim expanded territory for consciousness' in his work (ibid:99). His cultivation of the voiced presence of the performer within the dance included conversation, third person description, and opinionated responses to the dance. The commentaries reveal the performers' relationship to the dance.

Listening intently to one another, they find ways to interweave distinct commentaries so they begin to intersect and reference one another. Occasionally they pull back from the immediate action to comment on the general development of the dance.  
(ibid:169)

I experimented with how my performers' voices might be able to reflect some of the qualities of Juliet's oscillating presence and the distinct commentaries of *Dances that Describe Themselves*. Working with set movement material the dancers are given the task of speaking their movements while they carry them out. We explore how the tension between describing and dancing affects the movements they are making. I observe a particular intensity and concentration in the quality of the movement and a distinct fluctuation in the surety of the voice.

The simultaneous individual descriptions of the dancers begin to layer up and when I walk between and amongst the dancers I am aware of the differences between the voices close to me and of the quieter words spoken further away from me. This

experience, given the time to 'key in' to the range of voices, awakens a heightened attention that is able to accommodate these multiple layers. Recalling the myriad possibilities for interpretation in each movement (*Overdrive, A Woman Walks*), listening to these many voices allowed an opportunity for those multiple moments to be present simultaneously for me. I was then able to move amongst the different available descriptions which offered a useful insight into how these intimate commentaries might be available to an ambulant audience.

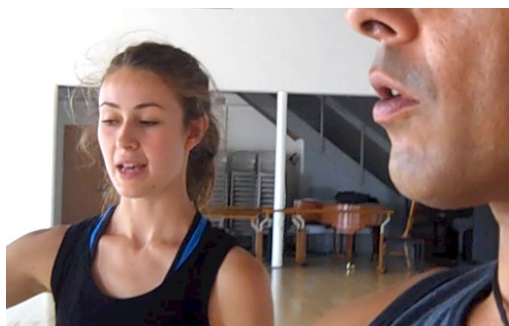


Image 7

Bill T Jones's work, *Floating the Tongue* (1978), as introduced in Chapter 2 aims to reveal different kinds of texts, spoken by the performer through shifting narrative boundaries. Jones's use of distinct rules for his 'phases' of choreography organises the work so that it incrementally reveals the inside stories of the performer's process. The texts that develop are spontaneous, fragmented, surprising: a blend of metaphor, memory and momentary observations. That they are contained within this rigid structure creates a lively friction. Barbara Browning (2005), on reviewing the piece describes how its structure develops,

As language is loosed, the rotation of the hip, the leg swiveling in its socket, frees up the torrent of implicit meanings, and Jones's tongue floats.... And in the final phase, he loosens text, tongue, muscle, and bone, and allows both language and movement to exceed their own bounds. His words swell and explode into groans and shouts, his movement bursting out of the set phrase into spasms, shivers, and convulsions.

During some performances Jones also added other phases of the dance.<sup>43</sup> This method of ordering and separating out, to examine difference and to create space for cross over, seepage and convergence is echoed in Bruno Latour's description of Serres' approach to examining his subjects – his attempts to separate out to see how edges behave.

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<sup>43</sup> The piece was performed by Jones until 2000/01 and continued being performed after this by his company members

Order is the rule: disorder the exception. Serres reverses this image: disorder, fluctuations, noise, randomness, chaos is what counts; these are the rules, order is the exception, it has the shape of pockets, of islands of stability, of fragile and tiny archipelegos. Thus what becomes most interesting are the transitions and bifurcations the long fringes, edges, verges, rims, brims, auras, crenellates, confines...all the shores that lead from one to another, from the sea of disorder to the coral reefs of order.  
(1988:94)

*Floating the Tongue* (1978) was created and performed by Jones inspired by his recurrent themes of exploring and revealing identity and histories. He exposes thought in the same moments as movements and has said he was motivated to dispel the idea that dancers do not think. Barbara Browning (2005) describes Jones as coming to this choreography through, 'attentiveness to subtle negotiations'. The work reveals the interplay between thought and body movement and demands describing and dancing simultaneously. It is performed in phases and develops from set material into improvisation;

1. Jones dances a solo silently
2. He dances solo while describing movements mechanically as in teaching a class
3. Describes movements and allows free association in the text including metaphor, memory, spontaneous thought – the movement expands in response.
4. Allows movement and speech to be mutually responsive, improvising around the set phrase and emerging spontaneous movement and words.

I take on this structure in my own reinvention of *Floating the Tongue*. I start phase 1 by spontaneously improvising a short solo and repeating it a few times to allow it to settle into a repeatable choreography. I describe the solo in phase 2 mechanically, using body part, rhythm and space information only, I chose to use dance terminology for several reasons: to highlight its narrow application; to reference the restricted code used in the studio among my dance colleagues; and to delineate this 'objective' phase as being closed, specialist and not particularly useful as a translation for a non-dance audience. This also underlines my decision to describe from inside the dance rather than describe from the perspective of an external observer. The vocabulary was one



used within the art form. To use an idea from translation studies, the text was reasonably accurate for the source (me) but not particularly useful for the target (listener). It could be considered to be an attempt at a formal translation.

*I walk straight down the room, turn to the diagonal, stand, stay. I continue to move through the phrase describing the movements as if to a class of dance students: body part, direction, weight or quality. An echo of Laban's choreology maybe. I incorporate dance terminology: first position, shift through the hips, parallel feet. I am aware that I am using this restricted, dancerly code as part of my attempt to keep up with the movement. On reflection I notice that within dance-making and learning environments our use of language has become or becomes so refined and abridged that in a few words familiar dancers can point to, reference or direct a whole series of movements or qualities. I am reminded of the subconscious short cuts taken in dance that only become apparent when the audience for the code widens.*

Smith studio notes (2013)

In the spirit of objective reportage, I can record that after many attempts to describe what I am doing in phase 2, I am confronted by a resistance in the body to language: as a subject body looking, feeling, interpreting, sensing, empathising and as an object body looked at, looking away, folding, twisting, turning, thinking, passive, challenging. My attempts to describe objectively, distancing myself from myself as dancer, dispassionate, mechanical, leave me dissatisfied by the flatness in my texts.

*I sit myself at Merleau-Ponty's desk and look out the window at the world. Its over there. I'm in here. Comfortable, invisible, neutral. What can I see? Its flat, like a screen. A petri dish I can examine from a distance. From here I can talk about what I see and how I think it might feel. I sit myself in the auditorium and look up at the stage. Its dark and the stage is glowing. The microscope's lamp is burning. It's flat like a screen. The microscope slide. From here I can talk about what I see.*

Smith studio notes (2013)

I am reminded of the possibility that this kind of text could trigger an over attentiveness that could numb the other senses. As I come to phase 3 of the task I remember the touched and touching: felt and feeling qualities of Juliet's string

description. I am interested in how this embodiment might create new qualities in the choreography as I attempt to broaden the kind of information spoken with metaphor and freer qualitative description.

During phase 4 I used metaphor and free running commentary that includes memory, associations and feelings and allows the movement of this emerging solo and its texts to open up, expand, retract and wander from the set frame. I try to keep the movement at its original speed, which creates overlaps, and fast edits as I chase the movement when it goes at speed and opens up and I extend texts at stiller moments. This method of attempting an impossible task gives rise to unexpected shifts and tensions in rhythm. I pause as I make decisions or become overwhelmed with effort and unexpected memories and associations emerge.

I began this phase as Serres' began his philosophy of perception: in the act of moving. Start moving, engage in an act, how does it feel? In opposition to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: sit still, what happens? What can you see? With an active attention to my body's knowledge, I asked what the movement told me rather than said what I saw it doing<sup>44</sup>.

Returning briefly to the model of dynamic equivalence discussed in section 3 of this thesis may offer a useful perspective when thinking about how these more subjective texts could produce an effect on the audience. Nida and Taber (1969:25) say 'dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information'. For phase 4, this might mean that as more layers of meaning are revealed in the texts, an overall effect might be created that is better representative of the dance than the formal descriptions. Like my walk amongst the speaking dancers afforded me an experience made up of fragments and overlapping words. My exploration of a 'thick description' in phase 4, crucially, also offers a new choreographic structure that incorporates multiple voices as a fundamental element of its identity.

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44 Serres suggests language has shadowed or 'veiled' the senses and blocked or inhibited their contribution to perception. Like Pythagoras and his veiled lecture, during which he hid behind a screen in an attempt to deliver his words without the threat of visual distraction – his words more powerful when dissociated from the body

I was keen to reveal my tangled mass of knowledges and presences in my own movements and to release the silent voices that I had always been aware of as a performer. This phase of the reconstruction offered an opportunity to explore an embodied response to some of Serres' ideas of the complex, multiply-mediated, tangle of sensory engagements experienced in movement. This was a choreography that elicited texts that were a meshing of moments of clarity, fragmented half sentences, memories, feelings, responses to environment. I felt that my voice was not separate to the choreography but of it.

Phase 4 was spent attempting to voice as many of the possible commentaries in the movement and allowing the body to respond to these texts. The movement slows to allow for the density of words and I move in slow motion, exploring each fall of the eyelids and every moment of every movement.

*Spreading the weight into the balls of my feet and growing up through my spine, heavy in my pelvis, jaw free, floating my tongue in my mouth, moment of beginning but I've already begun ....eyes begin to cast down...not ready yet...long shadow across the floor in front of me I feel disappointed, sad, I'm sorry....dark, let go, falling face. My fingers slowly start to spread and my hand opens to stretch the skin of the palm....*

Smith (studio 2013)

This text was elicited before any perceptible movement occurred. Part of the boundary of this task was to recognise its potential and restrictions and to allow myself to process between them. Dense with infinitesimal shifts, each one known and felt, the movement begins to become inscribed on my performing self. The arm does not just lift into first position. As I embody this task the movements themselves become histories, inscriptions of my dancing past and I slow my body as I listen to the tumbling avalanche of words that have evolved over years of use, describing the same movements year in year out in my own inner commentary. I am struck by how I have unconsciously excavated my vocabulary for evocative and productive language that has become as much part of my dance practice as my moving body: through coaching myself as a performer, working with others to find ways to express my choreography and through teaching. The tongue becomes as crucial as the body to express these

dancing ideas. I listened to my voice as I described how I was moving. The automatic, instinctive babbling, intensified within this impossible task twisted and turned and simultaneously tracked the body in space revealing emotional echoes of movements evoked by hyper-attentiveness in a particular body shape or position. The deep sadness and disappointment in a slow nod of the head or the desperation felt in an incremental opening of a hand.

These reeling words felt charged with memory and intense emotional scores but on reflection I also noticed that the quality of my voice changed: softer, lighter, quieter. The task was challenging and required an extreme concentration that was open enough to allow my thoughts to flow freely and disciplined enough to articulate them at speed. In phase 4 the voice is given space to explore the many textures of each movement resulting in dense texts and minimal movement: the aim of this task being that the layered meaning in each simple movement is given space to be revealed.

The task in phase 4 was to allow numerous threads of commentary to become entangled as I moved through the choreography. The set structure of the solo was lost at times as the movement and commentaries affected each other and triggered new movements and spoken thoughts. Considered in comparison to *A Woman Walks* (2009), where the layering of descriptions took place in isolation to the choreography (in the sound edit), in this experiment, the fragmentation and layering became like a live 'sampling' that could respond to the spontaneous physical and imaginative shifts that emerged.

Phase 4 could be considered as a deconstruction of my daily familiar process of dancing and making dances. Far from being distanced from the body like the population assumed in *The Five Senses* (1985), removed from the physical sensations of explosive and bounding movement, as a dancer I practice an almost exclusively felt relationship with my body in the world.

It is ironic that where Serres complains that language has a distancing effect on the body, as a dancer I have been silenced by movement. The intense and all-consuming processes of feeling and expressing through the moving body, of emptying, treading

and retreading, testing and listening, taking away and revealing, have rendered the voice unavailable. It has just not been part of the action.

I am curious as to how revealing intimate spoken presences of dance performers might provide new choreographic textures. My choreography, or choreography I describe, given words, could hinder its identity so much that it loses its capacity to inflect and suggest. I am motivated to explore what kind of dance performance could enliven the other senses: provoke and enhance rather than flatten the experience. I imagine a model for dancer's texts that weave and jump, each moment of movement lived, voiced and lost: inscribed then abandoned

The string experiments begin to knot together strands of the research: description; a more integrated understanding of sensory perception; and explorations of subjective experience as a distinctive element in the identity of a choreography. By closely considering AD in practice, wider sensory understandings had been introduced as well as a range of theoretical perspectives: together these provide a rich context for developing alternative approaches to choreography.

I question whether an alternative role for audio-description in dance be forged, freeing it from the restraints of 'translation' within the rigid confines of orthodox AD, and instead enlisting it as part of a rethinking of the present body in performance. In this liberated condition, conventional AD is transformed into 'voices' of choreography, acting as instigator, agitator, and commentator, functions that are equal to and enrich other components of performance.

My experiments with understanding and describing choreographic dynamics and the emergent questions of dealing with ambiguity and multi-layered complexity lead me to explore further the wider sensory field. In the studio, I begin to challenge the central premise that the body in performance is solely or primarily a visual presence. I also begin to consider the possibility that fully integrated, multi-sensory choreography might result in new work that has no direct comparison in dance.

As the thesis moves into Chapter 5 Unseen Choreographies, I propose a new

perspective on making choreography: one that does not privilege sight, that takes account of differences in perception, that both enriches and democratises sensory experience. I consider how identifying and opening up the sensory layers of a choreography might invite different hegemonic relationships possible for witnesses. The next chapter is concerned with enlivening the senses via non-visual means and generating descriptions outside of AD or translation frames.

## Chapter 5      Unseen Choreographies [\(FILM 3\)](#)

[FILM 3 includes *The Wrong Description* (2011) followed by *1 O'clock* (2010) leading into studio interpretations of that text. The final piece is a closely recorded sound work of the dances of *1 O'clock*.]

In this chapter I question how unseen presences of performers can offer an alternative interface in the witness/performer relationship. My aim is to develop more meshed and attentive sensory engagements in that context. I aim to refigure the 'audio-visual contract' (Chion 1994) for my choreographic practice. I explore how removing or obscuring the sight of the performer's body can draw attention to its other presences: creating unseen elements of performance that are composite to the artwork rather than an echo, shadow or description of the sound source. I consider how connections between performers and witness can be developed that encourage a more mingled or meshed sensory experience. This will inform a strategy for the final distillation of my choreography leading into Chapter 6.

I investigate how to give space to a more complex and liberated perceptual realm in which the role and dominance of vision in performance is both challenged and transformed to direct attention actively towards non-visual perception. The body is not absent in an unseen choreography. Corporeal presence is sonic, kinaesthetic, sensed through the body without sight: a 'meta-kinesis' (John Martin cited in Cooper Albright 2002:xix) that demands complex complicity between the senses.

Inviting a new interface with witnesses, one that engages in some of the ambiguities and uncertainties of my choreographies, renders the experience open to, and reliant on, the complex subjectivities and interpretations that AD tries to avoid. With reference to an abstract artwork in a gallery setting, Vocaleyes *Talking Images* (2002) research highlights the difficulties of the relationship between the describer, the work and the listener,

When it came to the relief (an abstract artwork), any attempt at description was complicated by the fact that the nature of an abstract work is to define its own boundaries - with any reference to the outside world being a subjective connection on the part of the viewer. This potentially put the describer in a much more intrusive position.

I explore my choreographies, *The Wrong Description* (2011), *1 O'clock* (2010), ...and I

was like, wow (2012) and Bock and Vincenzi's *Invisible Dances* (2011) as proximal, kinaesthetic and sonic presences. These pieces of work include the unseen presences of performers. This chapter considers a broader, more integrated sensorium that takes account of a complex perceptive experience and that reorients the individual subjective experience itself as rich artistic material.

I explore the disruption of the synchronicity between sound and image to consider how what we see and what we hear work together to build towards a complete experience. In my work, *The Wrong Description* (2011), the body as a sonic and kinaesthetically charged presence is explored and new sense connections are identified. This experiment manipulates sonic and visual information to qualitatively affect the perception of an ambiguous visual stimulus. I consider this in relation to Chion's use of the term 'synchresis' (1994) introduced in the Context Review page 40, to label the merging of synchronism and synthesis: to describe the meshing of knowledge that constitutes our understanding of audio-visual information.

*1 O'clock* (2010) is a starting point for developing new choreography that embodies some of the complexities of shared or simultaneous witness interpretation. *1 O'clock* is considered a key piece of material that threads through the research and into the *Dancing in the Dark* (2015) live performance. Aspects of Merleau-Ponty's 'intercorporeality' and the reciprocal act of seeing as an experience likened to that of touching is considered in relation to the performer/witness relationship. I explore how my performers and witnesses might be understood as having an affect on each other through relationships that mesh the senses but do not always include sight.

I also consider Erving Goffmann's concept of 'tactful blindness' (1959) and his theories on interaction behaviours in social settings to illuminate the issue of the agreed unseen elements of theatre. I refer to the development of my work, '*...and I was like wow*' (2012).

## 5.1 The Wrong Description

In this piece of video research (FILM 3) I explore disrupting the synchronicity of sound and image. I begin with a short phrase of solo movement I improvise. I describe the



movements as I am doing them. The spoken text and the movements emerge together. I make short videos of the task. On reviewing the footage I notice that in filming from a fixed, low-level point, only fragments of my body are visible. My arms, legs, head and torso sweep in and out of frame lending only glimpses of the whole picture.

The sounds of my footfall, breath and body against the floor were recorded close to the microphone and create an intimacy of proximity despite the absence of the complete body. As I listen to the commentary and watch snatches of limbs flash by I begin to consider how what we see and what we hear work together to build a complete experience. The verbal descriptions fill some but not all of the gaps when the whole body is not present: movement is suggested by the partial depiction of the body. This motivates further exploration into the presences evoked by sound, suggestion and voice. Despite only fragments of my body being visible, a sense of the whole body dancing develops by absorbing both the sound and images.



Image 8

This line of enquiry leads to investigations into how using different descriptive texts might alter or affect understandings of the dance. I fix the description of another dance, recorded in the same experiment, to the original footage, removing the original sound. Through an active perceptive calibration of the incomplete and mismatched materials, in a search for a kind of meaning, after several viewings I am able to settle on a new understanding of the dance. This experiment manipulated sonic and visual information to qualitatively affect the perception of an ambiguous visual stimulus.

Chion's 'synchresis' (1994:5), explains how audiovisual combinations come together and reinforce each other in a dynamic interplay between sound and visuals. The 'audio-visual contract' (ibid:216) is the process of cerebral synthesis that takes place when making sense of what is heard in relation to what is seen in cinema, 'the

spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time.'(ibid:63).

I found that on reviewing footage played with the sound of a different dance clip, I justified a logic out of illogical modalities. The disruption of the diagetic relationship between body, its sounds into the floor, breath and its description, charged my attention to the bodily presence. The effort of synthesizing what I was seeing and hearing into a new rationality became an active sensory buzz. By releasing the movement from its structured image and description, the choreographies could become more ambiguous, opening up new opportunities for directing witness attention.

The new sense connections identified through this choreographic research, demanded by this mis-matched material offered a productive method for creating choreographic material that required particularly active attention and this had the effect of bringing the act of perceptive experience into the foreground. My experience was that being made conscious of a process that is ordinarily absent or unnoticed was unsettling and at the same time empowering. The research became more focused on the processes of perception as performative material. This is a key shift towards my aim, already stated, of developing more meshed and attentive sensory engagements in the performer/witness relationship.

## **5.2 The Seen Unseen**

Analysis of AD in Chapter 3 highlights the tension between objectivity on the one hand and, on the other hand, sensitivity for the artistic 'essence' of a work, therefore avoiding staging information, for example. Troubled by the need to eliminate the 'unnecessary' technicalities of performance, I recall Hibbert's (2010) comments during studio research, 'Just tell me what's happening, not what you think I should know'. As I move into investigating non-visual or unseen aspects of performance, I retain ideas about the contract at play between the witness and performers during a performance in a theatre setting. In the studio I experiment with the ways sighted witnesses agree to not see.

The conventions of performance in a theatre setting incorporate the untheatrical: the practical and technical. The stage crew are clearly seen entering, shuffling in their eagerness to be invisible. We see what they wear, how they signal to each other and with what skill they undertake their roles. Performers stand, still, staring, hands by sides 'off stage' when clearly visible. They switch into 'present' as they step into the agreed performance space. A dancer trips, recovers and continues: focus unwaivered, momentum undisturbed. Following AD general guidelines, none of this would be described.

In his analysis of human interaction behaviours, *Frame Analysis* (1974), Goffman emphasises the initial framing of performance as being central to its understanding by the viewer. He uses the word, 'performance' to mean any social interaction. Goffman uses the expression 'keying' (ibid:59,79) to explain how social interactions are initiated. He outlines the process of establishing both etiquette for the interaction and a collaborative expectancy from the audience: that the subject and receiver undergo a process of gelling to lubricate the ensuing exchange.

Goffman's (1959) theories on interaction behaviours in social settings can illuminate the issue of the agreed unseen elements of theatre. He refers to 'avoidance' mechanisms that account for embarrassing or unpredicted behaviours. For example, conversation is ignored when it strays into topics that may cause upset so that we can maintain our composure rather than risk 'discredit leading to exposure' (ibid:234). This theory resonates with the way in which the potential embarrassments of the unseen in performance are accepted as silent or absent. Goffman calls this 'tactful blindness' (ibid:18). This is a reciprocal convention relying on complicity between parties where favourable facts are highlighted and others are omitted or ignored. It accounts for moments of social awkwardness and performance blunders (or blackout visibility for example) where pretending it never happened is preferred.

Models for understanding social behaviours in a performance context can help to rationalise a process of integrating descriptions and sensory provocations in a choreography by offering a frame for the offering and the boundaries of the describer-listener relationship. Goffmann's 'avoidance' theory and writing on

embarrassment (1967:109-11) can account for the polite disregard witnesses have for the unseen and untheatrical. His work on preparing an audience and on metacommunication sheds light on strategies to develop between witness and performer especially at the beginning of my performance work. The way the initial interactions of the performance take place; programme notes, welcomes, any necessary information or set up, even before it 'begins', will already begin the process of 'keying'. This also provides interesting starting points for devising, in that the establishing of certain social and performance codes are explicitly articulated with a new perspective for understanding dance. This reappears as relevant in the final chapter.

I experiment with the ways witnesses agree not to see in my piece *...and I was like wow* (2012). I include a woman creeping into the performance space in shadow. She skitters quickly along the back wall and down the side of the stage, hands outstretched low to the wall as if this helps her merge into the bricks. Thinking about the many ineffectual blackouts I have either performed in or witnessed, I began to imagine whole performances that happen in the half-light: no music, black clothing. Excited by the potential ambiguity inherent in this space: the limbic qualities of almost darkness, just seen, almost seen, might have seen, this work explores the action that takes place in the shadows. In an extended blackout two performers rustle in the wings filling a particularly noisy plastic bag with small percussive instruments. It seems an uncomfortably long time as witnesses stretch their suspended disbelief: and noisy, very noisy.

They start to run across stage clinging together as if this makes them less visible. There is the sound of something heavy dropping. They stop at the edge of the stage, frozen. They run back, pick up the item and finally disappear into shadowed wings. This exploration of half-light also reminded me that, around 97% of visually impaired people have some vision and that the exploration of heavily reduced light had resonance with that fact.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk> accessed 15 may 2014

This short section of performance opened up new space for me to explore, coming directly out of a response to AD guidelines- to avoid staging information that is not directly relevant to the 'storyline'.<sup>46</sup> The rigidity of the codes for AD give me something firm to push against: a frame to enable the exploration of new perspectives on my choreography. By deconstructing these guidelines I was able to explore the shadows. I became interested in exploring more ideas of choreography that occur in the dark: unseen but felt in some other way. Goffman's work on the agreed unseen informs how performance might be understood as a more ambiguous dynamic exchange inhabiting the shadowed edges of vision.

### 5.3 1 O'clock

*1 O'clock* (2010) (FILM 3) is considered as a key piece of my performance research material that threads into the *Dancing in the Dark* (2015) live performance research. *1 O'clock* leads in to explorations of sonic and kinaesthetic presences of choreography and new possibilities for embodied sensory experiences. *1 O'clock* becomes a starting point for developing new choreography that incorporates some of the complexities of shared or simultaneous witness interpretation. Aspects of Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality and the reciprocal act of seeing as an experience likened to that of touching are considered in relation to the performer/witness relationship.

In studio explorations with my visually-impaired collaborator, Lex Hibbert (2009-10), I dance while she describes. The commentary is detailed, extensive and surprisingly accurate in terms of the kinds of movements I am doing, the direction I am travelling in and the qualitative information she recounts,

Moving away from me now towards 1 o'clock and walking across the front of me and back towards me on the left...she's not still, her arms are moving but her feet are still. She slowly moves her arms and goes down and she's travelling in a swishing sliding way then moving way to my right. Hurrying away from me, round me then sweeping down as if to pick something up...'

Listening to Hibbert's description reminds me that what is seen is only a fraction of the perceptive experience. It is also a prompt to reconsider the premise of the AD rules, to 'say what you see' with a different perspective. I had under-acknowledged

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46 Describe what is essential for the listener to know in terms of plot development and character. <http://www.acb.org/adp/guidelines.html> With most performing arts, the describer should allow listeners to participate in the 'willing suspension of disbelief' by describing in terms of the story rather than the theatrical experience. (Snyder 2010:22)

the role of sound, kinaesthetic experience and proximity in the way I was approaching what I thought was vision. If this non-sighted describer could provide a commentary that included so much detailed information about the choreography, I had to reconsider what a spoken description really needs to include. I realised I had been attempting to say too much, trying to speak aspects of the dance that were already present through unseen means. I remembered the challenges of separating my own texts and dancing body and approaching them as two distinct phenomena in *A Woman Walks*. This recorded text, *1 O'clock*, prompted further investigation into how a body makes its presence felt.

Examples of non-visual manifestations of perception were profoundly enacted during other studio explorations.<sup>47</sup> During one task, two dancers faced each other. One verbally described a simple movement to the other with the intention of recreating the phrase: no bodily indications or demonstrations were permitted. The task was difficult. A reasonable approximation of the movement phrase was eventually reached through using a mix of bodily directions, simile and imagery. Then, with no spoken language one person closed their eyes and the other danced a phrase in close proximity to their partner. They were then asked to dance back what they thought they had just been shown. This method, elicited more accurate replication (and much more quickly) than the spoken directions. Participants were surprised at how well their partners had recreated the phrase and how much information was communicated without sight.

This studio research supported my findings in *1 O'clock*, that sight was less necessary for understanding how a body is moving than I had taken account of and this had a major impact on how I was approaching description. Exploring choreography non-visually had expanded possibilities for interpretations, which resonated with phenomenological readings of dance spectatorship as an embodied sensory experience. The fracturing of the relationship between body and sight demanded a physical and intellectual reprocessing of an understanding of the present body. This is further explored in Chapter 6 *Dancing in the Dark*.

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<sup>47</sup> Workshop sharing Dartington Arts February 2012

Hibbert's description prompted me to explore further the diversity of interpretations present among a range of witnesses of a performance. My work, *One Man Band* (2012) had highlighted the power of the singular describer's role in framing and influencing the listeners' experience. With this in mind, I asked four dancers to listen to Hibbert's *1 O'clock* description and dance their own versions of the dance. As a performance will generate individual responses in a witness group, this description would generate individual responses embodied in these listening dancers. This experiment physically played out the multiple possibilities in witness interpretation. The resulting dances were made up of criss-crossing near misses, synchronised and syncopated rhythmic structures and four individual journeys that together suggested the tangle of processes at play in their interpretations.



Image 9

The dances that evolved out of this particular task were not set or marked out. They held their structure through being guided by the recorded description. The distinctive characteristics of this dance were its moments of coequality and the harmony evoked by the shared intention, despite each dancer interpreting independently. This shared but idiosyncratic performance of the description articulated some of the complexities inherent in AD and witness interpretation. The individual responses shared more than they differed but each was a unique expression of the text. To borrow terminology from translation studies, switching the target text (the one translated to) in to the subject text (the one translated from) in this way had elicited new methods for generating movement material. This example of studio practice was a knotting together of ideas from translation, AD and a more integrated sensory experience.

The quality of the dancers' responses to the text was akin to the duet choreography developed by Rosie and Clare in *A Woman Walks* (2012 page 57). Many different layers of decision-making, certainty and uncertainty were present. They sketched out possible connections between them and between themselves and the recorded voice.

Merleau-Ponty (1968:131-133) explains that the act of looking is reciprocal and strongly shapes what is being looked at. He claims that the look 'palpates' the things looked at, it 'clothes them with its own flesh'. He identifies, 'this strange adhesion of the seer and the visible' (ibid: 139). I suggest that this 'adhesion' is also present between the listening dancers and Hibbert's voice. Each dancer reaches out towards the voice in their efforts to embody its experience, they then clothe it with their own distinctive embodiment.

A sound recording was made of the dancers undertaking this task, which was included as part of the final performance practice, *Dancing in the Dark*, further explicated in Chapter 6. The reconsideration of a description as a source material itself, rather than a conduit for translation or 'access to' the source led to me to *Invisible Dances* (2003).

#### 5.4 Invisible Dances

Bock and Vincenzi's 2003 work, *Invisible Dances....from afar: a show that will never be shown*, is introduced as an example of an unseen theatrical experience. This work placed the subjective response of an individual at the centre of its identity and is considered as an example of how dance can be rendered as a sound work that communicates the physical presences of the performers on the stage. The work also explores the absence of an audience group bringing focus to the individual act of listening. By making this the only way to experience the work, the piece's success relies on the kind of subjectivity vigorously rejected in conventional AD and this piece is considered as a useful example of how an unseen performance could unsettle or stimulate questions of presence and absence in performance.

*Invisible Dances....from afar: a show that will never be shown* (2003) took place in a theatre. It was attended by one witness, Fiona Templeton (The Watcher), who described the performance live. It was never performed in front of any other audience. The description was recorded and accessed by telephone at a later time. The transcript was also reproduced in full in the publication of the same name (2004:15),

A row of masks...shhhh...is any body there?... Masks mean they're looking at me... mean... she twitches...in her mask on stage still... one walks away to the back... in a robe... in a red robe...r, red, reddy reddy... they stand in a row, row, row... broken row... breaking inside her breaks... another naked goes back... backwards... another turns and walks away to the back... are they



looking at the watchers? Is any body there? Yes I am. You are. Are you? Are you listening? Are you there?

The work was presented as a question of how an audience could,

experience how a poetic world that is open to the personal interpretation of those present is translated; how (do) you describe the indescribable?  
Bock & Vincenzi (2003)

By presenting one subjective interpretation as the core component of the work, the flipside of conventional audio-description, *Invisible Dances* can act as an example of how uncertainty, ambiguity and suggestion in a descriptive work can be centralised within a model that unsettles the normative experience of performer/witness relations.

Denied the ready accessibility of the usual sounds, sights and context, the audience endures this performance in a state of sensory disorientation and unease  
Londondance.com (2006)

The piece is a sound work that renders the physical bodies of the performers as powerful presences on the stage. The work also explores other absences. Martha Fleming (The Witness, 2000) heard it but did not see it live during a performance given at an earlier stage of the research. She writes of the experience,

This work changes dance forever in my mind. Its apparently private vocabulary is so startlingly familiar that suddenly I see and recognise in others a manifest of events which I have heretofore only felt unconsciously in the very molecules of my being. Invisible dances will get right under your skin and move you to the quick.

By removing the visual component from the entire audiences' experience of the work and disconnecting the sight of the source sound from the sound itself, *Invisible Dances* is about the act of listening to one individual response to the artwork. *Invisible Dances* is a prototype for how an intentionally subjective perspective could explore new performance/witness engagement.

The crackle and hiss of the voice relayed broken descriptions of movement, a stammering and exhausted audio response to a piece which I, as audience, could not visualise. Straining to see with my ears a piece which was cut off from me by a dismembered and dislocated telephone voice I had to try to let go of my spectatorial desire in order to listen to the voice and follow its unfathomable instructions.  
Hargreaves (2004:125)

*Invisible Dances* restricts the way in which the work is made available and while this work was not a deliberate attempt to disrupt the relationship between a translator or

describer of dance performance (within the frame of AD for blind audiences), it reorganised expectations of the experience for all witnesses. Through its exploration of whether all is ever visible and presence and absence in performance its territory resonates with this research.

The tension depicted in the testimonies of those that heard the work by telephone and the profound responses elicited in relation to 'spectatorial desire' and 'private vocabularies' instigate a new confidence in my research. The charged presences of the performers in *Invisible Dances*, are manifested in the describer and the invited engagement is with the describer rather than the performers themselves. I develop my enquiry into how zooming in on the act of synthesising a perceptive experience, in this case of the witness describer, becomes of interest itself.

Like Clare and Rosie listening to the string commentaries while embodying their suggested movements, retreading the unfamiliar movement material of each other; like Juliet's voice flickering between described and describer; the deliberate uncertainty of the describer's voice in *Invisible Dances* embodies a potent ambiguity. In contrast to the foregrounding of the describer in *One Man Band*, when the meanings in a discreet commentary are fighting with the possible meanings of the dance work being described, the foregrounding of one sonic manifestation of the work explicitly rearticulates the source material, crucially, for all witnesses.

In the context of *Invisible Dances*, Kleege's (1998, 2005) two ideas - that blindness has the potential to be reconsidered as something other than a lack of sight, and that sight could be a contaminant in the holistic sensory experience of a phenomenon - together lead into consideration of the following: that non-sight or the unseen can offer dance performance a source for new ways of working, rather than be a problem to be solved for some non-sighted witnesses. Mindful of the examples of practice explored in this section and with a view to setting up the proposition for the final chapter, I am motivated to develop engagements that invite attention that is disrupted in some way, dense with sensory provocations and imbued with personal motivations.

By considering descriptions of unseen presences of the performer as source material, wider sensory understandings have been introduced as well as a range of theoretical perspectives: together these provide a rich context for developing alternative approaches to dance-making. As the thesis moves into Chapter 6, I propose a new perspective on making choreography: one that does not privilege sight, that invites differences in perception, that both enriches and entangles sensory experience. Through my explorations of subjective description of unseen dances as source material I have considered how identifying and opening up the sensory layers of a choreography might make possible a range of different relationships for witnesses and performers.

The choreographies explicated in this section explored greater ambiguity, opening up questions of perception, sensory mechanics and new opportunities for directing witness attention. The research became more focused on the processes of perception themselves as performative material or ways of exploring the intersubjective relationships between witnesses and performers and the multiple subjectivities of individual presences.

The studio practice in this chapter has explored a disruption of the audio-visual contract and proposed alternative witness/performer relationships. *The Wrong Description* demonstrated that visual and sonic information, manipulated to create mismatched materials, could activate a productive attention to the absences and presences of the body. The off and on screen action of the performer was enlivened by the mis-matched commentary. In another manifestation of on and off screen action, *The Seen Unseen 5.2* (page 86), explored elements of performance that take place in the edges of the physical performance boundaries. This also draws active awareness to the peripheries of perception. Unseen choreography was then investigated in *1 O'clock* and a detailed description of a dance by a visually-impaired describer, challenged what perceptive means we draw upon when we watch. Connections between unseen performers and listening witnesses were further explored by reflecting on *Invisible Dances*.

The new sense connections demanded by this area of the research offer a productive

method for creating choreographic material that requires active attention and this has the effect of bringing the act of perceptive experience into the foreground. Being made conscious of a process that is ordinarily absent or unnoticed is explored as unsettling and at the same time empowering. This develops into a method for creating choreographies that demand active attention from witnesses. By incorporating these layers of usually unavailable or glossed presences or voices, the relationship between performer and witness shifts: difference, connection, and play are exposed and can suggest new engagements. Sonic and kinesthetic presences are further explored in Chapter 6 as *Dancing in the Dark* is reflected upon and draws to conclusions.

This alternative strategy informs the making of the final work which aims to;

1. embody an interplay between seen and unseen,
2. rethink description as a more enterprising creative method
3. give space and authority to a more complex and liberated perceptual realm in which the role of vision in performance is both challenged and transformed.

## Chapter 6      Dancing in the Dark ([FILM 4](#))

[Recording of full length performance, Falmouth University June 2015]

This chapter reflects on the project as a whole and draws conclusions with particular reference to the performance outcomes embodied in *Dancing in the Dark* (2015), live performance research. The full performance is documented in FILM 4. This research, deliberately framed as being experiential has been rooted in my own subjective experience and a self-reflexive 'mapping' of process as enquiry.

A challenge of this research has been the need to write objectively of a process which is itself an analysis of objective, subjective, expressive and poetic interplay between words, texts and choreographies. I acknowledge being challenged when engaging in a process that demands exploration of the distance and intimacies of describing while also drawing more objective conclusions from that process. The thesis reaches the following conclusions within the context of this paradox. I reflect first on *Dancing in the Dark*, following the order of the piece structure. This is followed by my conclusions.

### 6.1      Or maybe just standing – performance reflections

Before entering the performance space, the performers introduce themselves to the witnesses and explain, 'In a moment we will go in. We will make our way, together, into the light.' With my attention on 'keying' into performance (Goffman 1974) and the careful establishing of the nature of the performance interactions, this initial exchange is vital in setting up the relationship between performers and witnesses. They all enter the space. The performance begins with a single spotlight and all stand in the light. The etiquette and collaborative expectancy for the exchange are introduced – the space is shared, people talk, there is eye contact - and the voice of Hibbert's description, (*1 O'Clock*) is played as the light fades to black.

In the blackout, attention is focused on the unseen. The sound is amplified into the room using 4 speakers placed at just over head height at each corner of the room. The sound system and individual tracks are specifically created to be able to shift the sound between speakers. This is to invite specific, directional, aural attention and to

allow for manipulated treatment of the sound sources with the intention of creating immersive sensations. The nature of the recording of Hibbert's voice and the sound of footsteps that travel around her, places her in a studio: the sound shifts between speakers. Hibbert's description of a person dancing is spoken as if witnesses share the space with her: orientation is in relation to her.

Standing in the dark, in a small area, focus is also drawn to the people standing close. Heat, breath – own and others' and proximity are apparent. The dancers move through some simple phrases in the dark. The movements are placed to introduce a focus on awakening the senses and to evoke a curiosity: to play with the idea of missing something. The sound recording is close and detailed and the footsteps round the space suggest the presence of another performer.

A light comes up on one performer. He is described in short sentences by the other 3 performers. Sometimes their words overlap. The words are a mix of physical observation, conjecture about his history or situation and imaginary snippets of personality. The incomplete and layered words sit together to provide a brief but detailed description of the man that stands in the light. The describers are situated among the witnesses. The words are softly spoken, perhaps not all heard by every witness: close and intimate. The decision to set up the initial interactions in this way is part of the keying process: to establish trust and collaborative expectancy between the performers and the witnesses. It is also a reflection of the set up of AD in theatre venues: the discreet voice whispered into the ear.

The next performer is introduced. As she walks, the sound of high-heeled footsteps echoes through the speakers. She walks out of time and stops before they stop in reference to the disruption in digetic and non-digetic sound explored in *The Wrong Description*. As she walks into her corridor of light, the first man rushes through the light behind her: a reminder that the piece will play with ideas of the seen and agreed unseen: he is 'offstage' to bring witness attention to the agreed edges of the space. Jane is described using an original text from *A Woman Walks* (2009).

As the text comes to an end a soft breeze blows in from the opposite direction. From the direction of the source of the breeze, a woman appears in silhouette. The edges of her outline flutter: clothing ripples and hair flies. Her face is not visible. The light emanating from behind her shines directly to the witnesses rendering all but her outline invisible. The fourth performer opens a folded sheet of paper and speaks. He, alone, reads a story of a woman.

At this point the reader falls to the floor among the witnesses and lies still. Looked down upon, he appears to keep falling. There are no words. He lies on the floor, watched. As the witnesses look down they take on the pose of grief, deep thought or regret. As the fan shuts down the sound of its motor fades and the sensation of the breeze lingers. In the stillness, there is time to reflect on the introductions. Each performer has been introduced drawing on a blend of descriptive means. This decision was made to establish that there would not be one constant mode of attention invited in the work. The range of modes employed to introduce the performers was intended to set up a proximal and multi-modal intimacy and to establish the use of recordings, spoken text and the physical movement of witnesses in the space.

The man (Josh) is pulled up to standing and is taken into a new space by Rosie. Light comes up and she begins to tell him what to do. 'You put your hand on my shoulder like that'. They see each other and stay close as Rosie describes to Josh how this new dance is constructed. This is a different mode of attention invited from witnesses as they now stand in the dark and the performers in the light. Rosie's attention is focused to Josh and Josh looks back into her eyes: responding, following her lead. The authority in Rosie's voice makes her the anchor of this exchange. As the dance is constructed it grows and becomes more layered with nuance as it is repeated. As Josh repeats his part, the pattern becomes more inscribed and the structure begins to settle.

The intimacy of the exchange between Rosie and Josh lends an assurance of calm trust developing between them out of initial uncertainty. They are creating a dance together, which relies on their intersubjectively negotiated settlement of role and

place. Merleau-Ponty (1942. 1964) articulated a 'state of flux' that occurs in intersubjective relationships. He refers to the 'lived consciousness of time' (1942:433) which Rosie and Josh share but experience differently: Rosie creates the solo from memory while Josh responds into the present.

Standing close are Jane and Kuldip. They watch but remain still. Like the witnesses, they observe closely. At one point, they assume the beginning position of the dance and Jane places Kuldip's hand on her shoulder. Jane keeps her gaze away from Rosie and Josh but listens intently. Kuldip keeps his close attention on Jane. Rosie and Josh continue to repeat and build their dance. Jane listens and follows the words she hears to make a dance they do not see. The dance that develops between Jane and Kuldip echoes and relates to that of Rosie and Josh but embodies its own distinct vocabulary. The movement between them embodies the questioning uncertainty of the duet of *A Woman Walks* (2012) and the criss-crossing moments of shared place and intention in the dancers' reconstruction of *1 O'Clock*.

The descriptions spoken by Rosie lead and respond to Josh's movement and they also guide Jane's interpretations of the duet. The duets reflect and respond to one another. These intimacies and the play between certainty and uncertainty during these two duets and the quartet they create, are an echo of Merleau-Ponty's writing on intercorporeality. The performers develop the choreographies in the moment. Jane deliberately does not see the dance she is recreating, instead recreating the active attention explored in listening tasks *Into Knots* and *1 O'clock* with the intention to instigate the particular qualities these experiments produced. The four performers follow individual but inter-related scores that involve reflecting one another's experiences in an unsettled dynamic exchange.

The process of making both duets is exposed by the performers. Revealing decision making in the moment and the negotiations required between performers allows witnesses to experience the vulnerability present in the moment of making. The performers are directed by me to talk through the movement development audibly: this might ordinarily happen instinctively. With the momentum of gravity or habit, this process might require an attempt to isolate or decelerate a moment, divorcing it from



its immediate history or natural conclusion. The deconstruction of the choreographic process to the fundamental thinking through of decision-making about where a part of the body goes, or what speed to execute a movement, is an echo of Juliet's knotting string task. The embodiment of deliberate uncertainty present in *A Woman Walks* (2012), *Into Knots* and *1 O'clock* has been carefully recreated to invite an attention from witnesses that is delicately balanced between seen and unseen, described and not described, inside and outside, subject and object. This was a primary aim of the research.

The movement and the way the dancers perform these duets reflects the process of thinking, listening and responding in motion. They perform their uncertainty. Sheets-Johnstone (1979:39) has suggested that a dancer can momentarily lose the dance, or change her presence within it while performing by becoming self-conscious on stage,

...as the dancer reflects upon herself apart from the dance that she is no longer one with it, and in consequence, destroys the illusion. It is evident in performance when a dancer becomes explicitly aware of herself. As soon as she becomes self-conscious, the audience is aware of a separation of the dancer from the dance. What appears, then, is not a single phenomenon, an illusion of force, but a physical body and movement which emanates from that body. The body and the movement appear as separate and distinct phenomena because the dancer is no longer pre-reflectively aware of her body in movement as a form-in-the making.

It is exactly this phenomena that interests me in this part of the performance of *Dancing in the Dark*: the space between enacting learned dances and the process of creating them. Sheet-Johnstone refers to a separation between the dancer and the dance. My attempts to both dance and describe in *A Woman Walks* and in my recreation of *Floating the Tongue*, played with this tension as a distinct performance quality. This strategy fulfills my research as it can reveal a presence ordinarily absent in performance, threading into the web of intersubjectivities in performer and witness engagement, evoking new choreographic textures.

I have worked against the 'illusion of force' (1979:33-35) Sheets-Johnstone refers to, which is an integrated presentation of movement and body and rather sought to reveal the state of flux present in acts of decision making or uncertainty. As the intimacy builds between Rosie and Josh and their complicity facilitates more complex movement, the witness/performer relationship settles. They take off into lifts, spinning

and landing softly. At one moment in the midst of this complex movement, Josh swings his arm through his movement and accidentally slaps Rosie in the face. The noise jars and there is sharp intake of breath.

Josh takes Rosie in his arms as they lean into their next movement and they stay in the embrace for a moment. In an instance of Goffman's (1967:18) 'tactful blindness', witnesses and performers appear unshaken as they continue into their next movement. The quality of the choreography does not recover and the delicate exchange between them is irretrievably shaken. This accidental incident, rather serendipitously lends an opportunity to remember the agreements made regarding the seen unseen, (5.2 page 86) between witnesses and performers and Josh continues to his next scene and lies back into the floor.

There is a repeat of Rosie pulling Josh up off the floor and the performers move to a new space in the room and stand still, eyes closed. The lights come up to wash over most of the large space. I notice that some witnesses also close their eyes. There is no other movement while a sound recording is played. The recording is played through all four speakers and has been treated to shift between speakers to heighten the feeling of movement in the room. This is a close recording and includes creaks of flooring, breath and footsteps. The recording is taken from the dancers moving to Hibbert's voice in *1 O'clock*. The intention with this section of the work is to create a sense of sweeping group movement sonically. This movement is echoed later in the piece. The time spent being still also offers opportunity to reflect on what has gone before and to perhaps recognize what kind of sensory responses the mismatch between stillness and the sound of sweeping movement together might elicit. This moment invited a different kind of relationship between witness and performer. In their stillness and with their eyes closed, the performers take on the role of object, while the witnesses become more clearly subjects. One of the dancers noticed that she felt a particular intensity in the gaze of witnesses when she opened her eyes: they were looking at her differently.

The performers walk to pick up a ball of string each. They each offer the end to one witness. Speaking directly to them they explain what they are doing as they begin to

unwind the string and walk away. String has been present through this research, first as part of Juliet's knotting task, through studio translations and into performance. The physical connection between performer and witness acts as metaphor for the intertwinings and reversibility of their presences in the performance space. The two, on each end of the string, exist as each other: subject and object, touched and being touched in a whole body, integrated sensory experience.

While the shifting subject/object presences at play when dancing/doing and watching has been researched in the studio, this section of performance was intended as an offer for performance witnesses to experience for themselves the tension and release, negotiations and awarenences present, while holding the string. This was intended to activate a sense of whole body immersion in the performance relationship. Both performer and witness shifted between eye contact and lowered gaze bringing attention to the object body as the performer described and the subject body as movements were felt and details noticed.

As the string lengthens, witness experience begins to include the overlapping voices of other performers and the physical criss-crossing of the string as it extends its web into the room. The snippets of different kinds of descriptive responses and fragments of sentences create a thick description of the experience: weaving of metaphor, opinion, memory and neutral words from both inside and outside the witness/performer relationship.

I recognise echoes of Serres' shuttling consciousness between the two surfaces touching his mouth with his finger, as I watch the interactions. The commentaries overheard from others and directed towards witnesses are not fluid but shift between close detail, simile, personal descriptive response and more distanced observation. Witnesses<sup>48</sup> reported sensing a heightened sense of awareness of body at the same time as a more objective distance as they listened to their partner: a state of being both in and outside the body. The quality of both control and surrender also expressing the states of perceiving themselves and another person: sharing

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48 Dancing in The Dark studio research April 2015 and performances June 13th 2015

intersensory relationships with another. An intense concentration is apparent and the embodiment by witnesses and performers and the shuttling between seen and felt selves in this section sets up and reinforces the shared engagements required for the next section.

The next section is led by three of the performers in turn who remember and describe imaginary or real dances they have been in. The witness group is directed around the space according to where the performer requires them to be in order to receive the scene as they direct. The performer's voice is reflective, sometimes nostalgic and relives some of the qualities of the remembered dance. The research for this section included investigating how much and what kind of information was needed to recreate a sense of the memory of the dance.

The nature of the exchange, a witness recounting a memory, offered a different kind of quality to the words. It was intended to be personal, relying on what each performer recalled. The verity of the memory was called into question and the focus was drawn to how it was remembered and recounted as opposed to the accuracy of the movement. I approached these stories with ideas of dynamic translation in mind. The performers were encouraged to remember the dances as how they were important to them, focusing on the elements they felt were significant to share in their recounting.

With witnesses and performers being directed around the space by each speaking performer, the whole room becomes active in each scenario. The proximity to the person speaking changes as the memories are played out and at times the speaker invites witnesses to physically take part. There are two moments in Josh's story where listeners are asked to take on specific movement roles, 'hold on and pull me down' and, 'hold up your arm and take it side to side slowly like a wave'. While the wave action is being performed, the group is standing looking across towards the other performers waving back. The piano starts to play. In a clear shift, the entire group become performers. There is a different kind of awareness of roles within the piece: an opportunity to see things differently.

Rosie takes on the role of speaker and three performers rush round the periphery of the space. 'We are horses' she shouts. The speed and sound of them rushing by prickles a reminder of the sound track with stillness played earlier in the piece: a suggestion of a repeat of this unseen movement. The performers gallop around the edge as witnesses gather in the centre, a reference to their beginning position. The witnesses turn on the spot to follow the performers. As Serres considers that the body is at the centre of perception and attempts to find ways to convey, for example the bounding joy of running or jumping, this moment literally puts the witness bodies at the centre of the bounding movement.

Incorporating this in the piece is an attempt to evoke a dynamic kinesthetic response in the witnesses, the energy of the running and the sound of feet into the floor can suggest a feeling they are running themselves. As Serres attempts to write an experience of the world from the body, here I have attempted to offer a physical opportunity to 'feel' the performance from the body.

The end of the piece takes us back to the first image. Kuldip stands in his spotlight and Hibbert's voice returns. Her voice is played while he stands still in his spot. The light fades just as he steps out of the light towards the witnesses who stand on the other diagonal corner. Hibbert continues;

*Slowly walking across the front of me, more relaxed*  
*Walking up and down the middle*  
*Might have been suspension to go into the steps*  
*Standing very still holding a shape*  
*or maybe just standing*

Hibbert's statement at the end of her text leaves the piece physically and metaphorically in the dark. Her uncertainty is confidently voiced but reminds the witness that she does not see him. Kuldip begins to walk towards the witness group as Hibbert speaks this last line. Only his first few steps are visible but as the lights fade to black his walk continues to be heard and the feel of his body getting closer is profound.

This final distillation of performance work negotiates balances between ambiguity and essential 'meaning', inflection and direction and puts in place the conditions for enlivening the senses. I have worked with performers to reveal spoken and recorded poetic texts, soundscores and relationships that reveal and provoke unseen and seen presences and offer more integrated communicative modes in performance. I have put in place the conditions to activate moments of intersubjectivity by inviting embodied and relational engagements in performance of *Dancing in the Dark*.

## **6.2 Conclusions**

In this thesis I have argued that by rethinking ideas of audio description, from the beginning of a devising process, it is possible to produce new choreographic work that does not privilege vision. Challenges arising out of my practical experiments with audio-description provided a base for exploring wider sensory engagements with dance performance. My studio-based practice-led methodology has given rise to new approaches to choreography that embody the interplay between seen and unseen, described and not described, inside and outside. Choreographic developments, in the context of a phenomenological methodological approach have encompassed description, the uncertainty of translation and interpretation, and a range of nuanced qualities and expressions.

This research began with embodied investigations into voicing and describing dances. The dancing body in the context of my contemporary dance choreography is not mundane, codified or pedestrian and there are no agreed set of terminologies for its vocabulary. It embodies complex subjectivities and idiosyncratic expressive movements that often emerge out of improvisation, alongside stripped down or minimalist aesthetics. This kind of choreography can prove overwhelming for an audio-describer attempting to follow the rules of conventional AD. This essential ambiguity has also presented much opportunity for exploring alternative modes of provoking sensory engagements with witnesses.

Some of the barriers in AD have been reconsidered as choreographically productive. Subsequent experiments with proximal, kinaesthetic and sonic presences explored the

potential to reorient artistic production itself as the site of rethinking communication modes. Taking on the challenge that a time-based linear structure of language is inevitably inadequate for describing and reflecting the world 'as it happens', my studio practice has explored a more integrated, crisscrossing sensorium and a wider understanding of perception and embodiment. These explorations shaped the final piece of practice in this research and provided the intellectual context for reflecting on its performance.

I have created a range of alternative voices and bodily presences in *Dancing in the Dark* and explored new communicative processes, emerging out of different perspectives of the present body in performance. These include; choreography that exists only as a sound piece, that is recreated in real time based on memory, interactive engagement between witnesses and performers that is one to one and includes spoken words and shared movements. I have also developed spoken descriptive commentaries for the performers that expose less certain, more spontaneous presence that can offer a different kind of textual component to the choreography. I have argued that voices from within a choreography can reveal identities and presences that are often glossed over or unavailable to audiences.

By exploring relationships between concepts, actions and behaviours in the studio, progress has been made towards clarifying and exploring some central concerns of integrated sensory performance. Both *Dancing in the Dark* live performance and this writing have sought to explain empirical examples of artistic process within a coherent intellectual structure. The focus has been upon testing describing approaches in the studio, and finding workable models for negotiating the challenges of the web of subjectivities between performers and witnesses and how this has evoked new choreographic textures that invite multi-sensory attention in performance.

I have produced choreographies that embody and develop my research themes. The new knowledge produced is related to the synthesis between texts, movement and witnesses as outlined above and I have addressed a new approach to choreography that incorporates unseen and idiosyncratic other presences. I have broadened the

tools available for a choreographic practice that seeks to embed a range of communicative and sensory textures within its fabric.

The next steps for this research might be to collaborate with companies or other choreographers to develop their choreographies to invite different modes of sensory attention. I propose perception, experienced with others but not necessarily shared, is unstable and contested and can be approached as such to create choreographies that invite multiple subjective interpretations with opportunities to influence and propose newly framed interactions between witnesses and performers.



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